

# Kids & Turtles

by Charlotte Overby

Have you ever been in the woods, just hiking or exploring, and heard the leaves rustle near your feet? You turn toward the noise, and all of the sudden you see something plowing through the brown leaves. **Cool. A turtle.**

Pretty soon, the words come out of your mouth. "Can we keep him?" And your parents get that expression that tells you they're going to say no. You can see it coming.

Most of the time, they probably give you good reasons for not keeping a turtle. We don't have room. We're too far from home. The turtle will be happier in the wild. It's probably that last one—that the turtle will be happier if it's left in the wild—that convinces you. You look at it for a while, pick it up to admire its shell, then let it go.

But sometimes parents say yes. If you decide to keep a turtle, do you know how to care for it? Here are some simple guidelines for keeping a turtle. ....



Jim Paollet

Softshells (top) and snapping turtles (right) are considered game species and should be left alone. Box turtles (above) make good short-term pets.



Mark Sullivan



## Before You Bring it Home

### Plan to keep your turtle for only a few days.

(Two weeks is the longest you should ever keep a wild turtle.) Remember, turtles may seem like good pets, but they are wild animals. Turtles kept by people for too long often become listless, don't eat well, suffer from malnutrition, develop eye problems and may die of starvation. You can avoid these problems by keeping the turtle for a just a few days—long enough to enjoy watching it and learning about its behavior.

### Be prepared to return it to the same place you found it.

Imagine if you were scooped up by an alien, observed for a few days and put back on Earth—only the aliens set you down in Hong Kong. You might survive, but it would be hard for you to find food, shelter or someone to communicate with. Animals that are returned to unfamiliar habitat face similar obstacles. Make sure you will be able to go back to the same place you found the turtle when it comes time to let it go—otherwise it probably won't survive.



Box turtles know their home neighborhood like you know yours. If you release them in a place unfamiliar to them, they probably will not survive.

## What kind of turtle did you find?

While it is unlikely you'll capture a rare turtle, Missouri is home to some rare and threatened species, such as the western chicken turtle, yellow mud turtle and the alligator snapping turtle. It is important to make sure the turtle you found is a common species.

In Missouri, there are two basic types of turtles: box turtles and semi-aquatic turtles. There are two types of box turtles—three-toed box turtles that live in brushy, wooded areas and ornate box turtles that live in prairies and open areas. Missouri is home to about 15 species of semi-aquatic turtles that live in rivers, ponds, swamps and marshes. Some of these species can grow to be quite large and are hard to take care of.

Whether you plan to keep a box turtle or a semi-aquatic turtle, here are some things you have to do to take good care of it.

## Box Turtles

**Shelter:** Keep it in a large, sturdy cardboard box (works well for one to three days) or an aquarium for longer periods of time. Line the bottom with newspaper or pea gravel. Box turtles need to soak in warm water, so include a shallow pan of water that's about 75 degrees. Clean your turtle's temporary home regularly.

**Food and Water:** Make sure your turtle can always get to a clean, shallow dish of drinking water. Turtles will foul their water, so change it regularly. Feed your box turtle as much natural food as possible. Collect grasshoppers, crickets and earthworms to feed it, as well as dandelion flowers and fresh berries. Three times a week give it a mixture of fresh fruits and vegetables that have been chopped into pieces about the size of a quarter. Add a tablespoon of canned dog food to each mixture.

**Light and Temperature:** Keep box turtles in a place where the temperature is a steady 75 to 80 degrees. They also need to bask under a 40- to 60-watt lamp for six to eight hours a day. This helps them reach a temperature of 92 degrees or more, which helps them digest their food. (This is why you often see turtles in the road or in the sun—they're basking.)