



Fish & Feather

TORTOISE CARE SHEET

Several species of tortoises are commonly kept as pets in Victoria. These notes are designed to assist owners who have no previous experience with these reptiles.

The Order Chelonia contains a number of families whose members are variously known as turtles, tortoises or terrapins. There are no hard and fast rules about these terms. As a guide the term "TURTLE" applies to marine forms which are generally large, have paddle like limbs and live in the sea from which they emerge only to lay eggs. Land "TORTOISES" vary in size, have domed shells, club-like feet and rarely enter the water. There are no true land tortoises native to Australia. Many other forms have more flattened shells, webbed and clawed feet, inhabit freshwater and frequently venture onto land. These are variously known as freshwater turtles, terrapins or water-tortoises. In Australia they are usually called "FRESHWATER TORTOISES". The common Australian tortoises belong to the family Chelidae the "SIDE NECKED TORTOISES".

Freshwater tortoises have two distinct shell surfaces - the upper shell or CARAPACE and the lower shell or PLASTRON which are joined on each side by a BRIDGE. They all have clawed feet and like the lizards and snakes they shed their skins. This usually happens early in Spring when the individual shields (or scutes) of the shell lift and flake off, and pieces of skin from the head, neck, legs and tail peel away from underlying new skin.

Freshwater tortoises most commonly kept as pets in Victoria are the Eastern Long-necked (or Snake-necked) Tortoise and two short-necked species, the Macquarie (or Murray River) Tortoise and the snapping tortoise. The Macquarie is the largest of the three, reaching 35-40cm in length, and has a dull olive-brown, slightly flattened carapace and a cream plastron. The "Snapping Tortoise" has a rich brown carapace that has a distinct ridge or keel, particularly in small specimens, and the edges are strongly serrated. The plastron is cream and most individuals are 10-20cms in length. The Long-necked is probably the most widely kept species and reaches 25cms in length. The carapace is dull brown to black and the plastron is cream with the individual shields outlined in black. As its name suggests, this species has a long, snake-like neck. In very young specimens the plastron is marked with reddish-orange patches. If roughly handled Long-necks will exude a clinging foul-smelling fluid from glands adjacent to the bridge.

CHOOSING YOUR TORTOISE -

Before obtaining your tortoise check with the Fisheries and Wildlife Service to make sure you are allowed to keep that particular species and whether you need any permits. The only legitimate sources of tortoises are licensed pet shops. You may not collect tortoises from the wild.

When choosing your animal, make sure that it is quite active and pulls its head back if touched. Its eyes should be bright and clear, and its nose and mouth clear of any mucous or saliva. Check the shell and skin for any signs of fungus (white or soft areas). These may be difficult to eradicate. The shell should be clean and hard. The shells of young tortoises may be rubbery due to an incorrect diet. Depending on the age of the animal this condition can often be reversed with a change of diet. When picked up, a tortoise should not feel too light as this could indicate starvation, dehydration or disease.

The claws are quite sharp so take care when handling a large tortoise. Some tortoises, especially the short necked species, can, and sometimes will, deliver a painful bite. Also remember to support the animal as much as possible during handling. Adult specimens can be transported in calico or cotton bags or in a box, but it is not advisable to transport several together as the weaker animals may be trampled or deprived of fresh air. Give them a good soak before departure and on arrival to prevent dehydration. Do not put any rocks or branches etc., in the bag with tortoises and remember to keep the bag out of extremes of temperature and draughts. It is probably wise not to handle the tortoise until it has adjusted to its new surroundings.

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