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Turtle Fans Come Out of Their Shells To Sing Reptile's Praises

By Ben Taylor

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You won't find a picture of piercing red eyes in a stumpy head next to the word "cute" in the dictionary. To make that connection, we have to turn to Stephany Moore.

"There is nothing cuter than a little turtle face looking up at you saying 'feed me, feed me,'" Moore says.

Moore's attitude is a common one. All over the city, backyard turtles are becoming a household commodity— their yellow-striped shells popping up everywhere at the start of the summer. And whether as purchases or coincidental nomads, turtles are taking the role of natural pest control and friendly family pet.

"Turtles are one of the few pets that sometimes find you and that Mom will let you keep," says Alan W. Kerr. "They are the one cute reptile."

Kerr and Moore are the founders of The Sulcata Station, an online information base for all aspects of raising the large and largely popular Sulcata tortoise. They are also members of the Rio Grande Turtle and Tortoise Club, or RGTTC, a group of more than 20 people who meet every month to discuss raising the reclusive reptiles.

(In case you're not up on the particulars of our slow, shelled friends, turtles can be semi- or fully aquatic. Tortoises live only on land.)

At their June meeting, the members of the RGTTC talked about their turtles and tortoises like parents at a child support group. Veteran owners are easy to spot. Patient and wise, they nod with closed eyes as common turtle problems are brought up, amusing anecdotes included.

"When I found Anthony (my turtle) walking along an arroyo, I picked him up to take him home with me. Now, I'm tall, and I held Anthony so that his head was facing me so he wouldn't be afraid of the drop-off. Well, Anthony ended up biting my navel. Of course, he didn't know it was my navel, he was just going for anything he could get to, but boy did it hurt," recalls Gary Lumkuhl.

Immediately the group tosses out solutions to the biting dilemma, suggesting everything from whiskey under the nostrils to a whack with the hose to passively letting the turtle have its way.

Chew or be chewed

"The thing with turtles is that they don't let go until they want to let go," Moore says.

Along with biting, the hazard of owning both turtles and dogs came up, much to the disgust of the group.

"Dogs aren't always bad, but when you leave them alone in the back yard, dogs tend to get bored, and when they get bored, they chew on anything they can find," says Teresa Dominguez, president of the RGTTC.

In unison, the club members put on a pained wince, playing out the dreadful scene in their minds.

Generally, turtles do fine on their own, fully able to fend for themselves and survive on garden grubs and snails.

"Turtles are pretty much loners," Dominguez says.

Try telling that to the members of the RGTTC, who individually own anywhere from four to 26.

"With turtles, you can't have just one. They're worse than potato chips. It's an addiction," Moore says.

But no matter how many turtles a member may have, each has a special name and a distinct personality. Notable names from around the RGTTC include: Sammi, Willie, Ra, Isis, Delilah, Amanda, Audrey and Amelia. And each one is different from the next. Audrey may be a biter, while Sammi may be frisky and congenial.

"They have behaviors that make them very easy to anthropomorphize," Moore says.

After two minutes of tortoise talk, it becomes clear that anthropomorphizing is half the fun of ownership. While discussing diet and eating behavior, Kerr and Moore enter into a sort of tortoise-behavior interpretive dance— Kerr emulating the stiff-armed strut of the ancient reptile, Moore crawling about on the ground, showing in detail the frantic hunt and race for placed food, and the smug contentment over being the first to arrive.

If you, too, wish to learn the steps of the turtle-owner waltz, consider Heather Angevine your dance instructor. Angevine, owner of Subterranean Jungle on Morningside NE just north of Central, is an authority on basic turtle-raising.

Although she doesn't raise turtles (her five Labradors create a not-so-friendly environment), she owns 40 various other reptiles, and her store includes at least five terrariums housing turtles of all shapes and sizes. Ornate box turtles sell for \$60 each.

"Turtles are generally good for pest control. They love to eat crickets and snails, and they will dig up grubs to eat," Angevine says. "However, turtles are not good for ants. Ants are deadly to turtles. They get into turtle shells and can bite the turtle to death."

Size and coloration distinguish turtle gender. In ornate box turtles, a common backyard turtle species, males tend to have bright red eyes, yellow and brown patterned shells, more of a dome shape, and range in size from 5 to 6 inches in length. Females are generally smaller and flatter, with plain light brown coloration and no shell patterns.

Happy wanderers

An important thing to consider when raising turtles is that they burrow and can escape from yards that aren't properly enclosed.

"Box turtles are free-roaming turtles. This means you buy them one summer and you'll find them the next summer in your neighbor's yard," Angevine says.

You can ward off this Houdini-syndrome by placing plywood, bricks or paving tiles along the walls of the turtles' enclosure, about 18 inches out from the wall to discourage tunneling.

Also remember that, as with other reptiles, turtles carry salmonella bacteria, and there is a chance that it can spread to humans. You can greatly reduce, if not entirely eliminate, your risk by washing your hands thoroughly after you handle a turtle.

To further prevent the spread of salmonella, turtles can't be sold until they're longer than 4 inches.

"When turtles are 4 inches or smaller, children tend to stick them in their mouths and risk severe salmonella poisoning," Angevine says.

As with all reptiles, turtles will grow as fast as you feed them. They have a slower metabolism than mammals and do not need to eat as much. Overfeeding can be dangerous to the turtle's health. In fact, Angevine goes so far as to say that feeding is not a necessity.

"Box turtles can survive on their own without any problems," Angevine says.

When Moore started raising turtles, she made the mistake of feeding them almost every day. She has now learned that a bit of tough love is necessary and beneficial.

"Turtles thrive on a sort of benign neglect," Moore says. "Just don't obsess— and let them be turtles."

Letting them be turtles is where much of the appeal lies. Watching it strut about with an ancient gait, expressing nothing but calm and patience as it unsheaths its head from the world's first mobile home, is like looking through a window back into a simpler time. A time somewhere around 200 million years ago.

"They have a dinosaur resemblance, amazingly ancient-looking," Kerr says. "It's like watching something truly prehistoric."

SHELL-HELP GROUPS

Rio Grande Turtle and Tortoise Club: www.rgttc.org.

The Sulcata Station: www.sulcata-station.org.

Subterranean Jungle: 255-1043.