



## Hatchling Turtle Foster Program for Educators

The Central MS Turtle Rescue regularly takes in female turtles that lay eggs while in rehab. We also always check recently-deceased females and extract any eggs she might be carrying. These eggs are then incubated by us, and if all goes well, baby turtles are hatched in 2 to 3 months. The hatchlings then remain in care over winter and are released next summer.

In 2018, we began the hatchling turtle foster program for educators. For those educators interested in having educational turtles in their classrooms, but don't have space or resources needed at home to care for a turtle year-round, this is could be an excellent option. The educator will care for the hatchling(s) through the school year and return them when school wraps up next summer (or in some cases release the turtles themselves with their students!) This program is available to any and all educators, including public school educators, private school educators, college/university educators, as well as home-school educators.

### **Rules/Guidelines. As a Turtle Foster, you agree to the following:**

- Even our fosters have to be legally able to possess a turtle. In Mississippi, this requires the possession of one of the following:
  - Resident Sportsman's License
  - Resident All Game Hunting and Freshwater Fishing License
  - Small Game Hunting and Freshwater Fishing License
  - Non-Resident All Game Hunting License

\*If you do not currently have any of the above licenses, one can be easily and inexpensively obtained at Walmart or online here: [https://www.ms.gov/mdwfp/hunting\\_fishing/](https://www.ms.gov/mdwfp/hunting_fishing/). The Hunter Safety Education Course is NOT required for the Small Game Hunting and Freshwater Fishing License. You will need to submit a copy of your license with your program application.

- Handling of the turtle(s) should be kept to a minimum. Turtles carry salmonella and turtles stress easily. Limited handling benefits both you, your students, and the turtles. The turtles should never be handled by anyone under 14 years of age.
- Due to the aforementioned salmonella risk, you must ensure that hands are washed properly anytime anyone handles the turtle(s), the tank, décor, or any other surface touched by the turtle.
- You must be able to furnish your own supplies (supply lists are below.) We can provide you with commercial pellet food and any necessary vet/medical care, but all other supplies must be furnished by you or your school.
- You must have a plan in place for times when your classroom will be vacant for longer than a weekend. The turtles will need to eat every day to every other day, so someone will need to be available to check on and feed the turtles during school off-times such as Christmas Break, Spring Break, long weekends, etc.
- If housing more than one turtle, you will need to monitor them for aggression, bullying, or intimidation. If signs of any of those occur, the turtles will need to be separated. You can house them separately if you have the space and resources; otherwise, the aggressive turtle will need to be returned to CMTR.

- You will be responsible for monitoring the turtles' health, weight, and size. You can do this yourself or make it a class project. If you're fostering more than one turtle, you will need to find some way to remember which turtle is which, so that you can determine if that turtle is thriving or is perhaps sickly or is getting bullied out of a fair portion of food. Also, if one turtle is growing at a much faster rate, or if one appears to be the "runt" of the group, the odd-sized turtle will need to be separated. Larger turtles can harm smaller ones. We ask that you check in with us monthly and report the turtle's overall health, weight, measurements, and behavior.
- You need to understand that sometimes hatchling turtles just die. It's called Failure to Thrive, and no one knows exactly why it happens. You should be prepared for this, and your students should be prepared as well. Death is harder for younger students to comprehend, so keep this possible occurrence in your mind when determining if this foster program is right for your classroom.
- You will be responsible for feeding the turtle every day to every other day. For the first 2-3 months, daily feedings are best. Saturdays and Sundays can be skipped. The preferred food at the beginning for aquatic turtles is ZooMed Hatchling Turtle Formula. For box turtles, a variety of food should be fed. We will provide the commercial diets on the attached list, but you will need to provide any fruits and vegetables. You will need to feed enough food at every meal to equal the size of each turtle's head. It doesn't seem like much, but that's all they need. You don't want hungry turtles, but you don't want fat turtles either. Don't give in to the begging for more food. A healthy feeding amount is "what would fit inside their head if it were hollow." After the first 3 months, a larger pellet (Reptomin Baby) can be given daily to every other day. Again, only as much as would fit in his head if his head were hollow. At around 6 months of age, dark leafy greens can be dropped in the tank on non-pellet days. This will get the turtles used to eating green leafy plants that they might encounter in the wild.
- Do not house the turtle with any other species of animal, including fish. Other animals (fish, snails, crabs, etc.) can harm the turtles.
- If you are a homeschooler and the turtle(s) will be housed in your home, you are to keep the turtle(s) safe from other pets, young children, and visitors.
- If the turtle will be housed in a school or other building open to the public, you are to take measures to ensure the safety and security of the turtle(s) from visitors, night staff, housekeeping, etc.

## Supplies Needed – Aquatic Turtles

- Aquarium or other approved tank (such as a Waterland tub, stock tank, etc.) 1-4 turtles will probably do fine in a 20-gallon-long aquarium or equivalent, but a 40-gallon breeder or equivalent (if possible) would be better if housing more than 2. Adjustments will need to be made to accommodate the turtles if they should grow faster than expected to prevent an over-crowded tank. Whatever tank you choose MUST have a screened lid that fits securely over the top. This is to prevent escape (turtles are amazing escape artists) and it also allows you a platform to rest the UVB and Heat Lamps on. (It also helps prevent curious little hands dipping in the tank to “pet” the turtle when you’re not looking.) The species of turtle you’ll be fostering are great swimmers and love deep water, so plan to make the tank 1/2 to 3/4 full to give them plenty of room to swim.
- Aquarium stand. You’ll need a surface to put the tank on. Do not put it on the floor. We recommend not putting it near windows to prevent algae growth and to prevent overheating in sunlight. Windows can also be drafty in the winter which can cause respiratory infections.
- Filter. Turtles poop twice as much as fish, and so will need a filter twice as strong. If you have a 20 gallon tank, you’ll need a filter rated for 40 gallons, and so on. Baby turtles can easily be sucked into intake tubing of filters, so you need to make sure your filter has some kind of plastic or metal guard around the intake tube. Turtles must breathe air and cannot hold their breath indefinitely. If they get sucked into or onto the tube and can’t escape, they could easily drown.
- Basking platform. This can be a Turtle Topper, a ZooMed Turtle Dock, or any other kind of basking platform you prefer. It must allow the turtle to climb on it and get completely out of the water, top and bottom. This drying/basking period is critical to shell health.
- Heat Lamp. This should be placed over the basking platform and should be a wattage high enough to produce a basking spot of around 90-95 degrees. You can use specialty basking lights or regular incandescent household light bulbs to produce this heat. A dome fixture will be needed to house the lightbulb.
- UVB Light. Turtles MUST have UVB to convert it to Vitamin D3. Without Vitamin D3, they cannot absorb calcium properly and can die of Metabolic Bone Disease. The UVB light should also be positioned at least partially over the basking platform so that the turtle can absorb the UVB rays outside of water. (UVB rays don’t penetrate into the water.) We recommend ZooMed or Exo Terra brands, in either the tube fluorescent or compact models. (Please stay away from any swirly/corkscrew shaped bulbs.) The tube fluorescents will require a fluorescent fixture. You can pick up a cheap one at any Walmart, but you MUST remove the plastic or glass piece covering the bulb because UVB rays don’t penetrate plastic or glass. A compact UVB bulb can be placed in a dome fixture like your heat lamp, but doesn’t cover quite as much area as the long tube bulbs do.
- Tank Heater. Hatchling turtles require a water temp in the range of 72 to 78 degrees. If your classroom is on the cool side or gets drafty in winter, you’ll need a tank heater. We highly recommend one with a guard around the outside so that tiny turtle feet aren’t burned if they stand on it. (Which they love to do for some reason.) We also recommend one that you can change the temp setting on, not one that has only one temp setting.
- Thermometer. You’ll need to measure the temps of both the water and the basking area, so a thermometer with a probe that can be used in wet or dry applications works very well.
- Tank décor.
  - The substrate should NEVER be aquarium rocks. Turtles will eat these and they can cause impactions. Bare tank floor is perfectly fine, but if you want something on the bottom, use large rocks that can’t fit in their mouths no matter how big they grow.
  - Plants. These can be live or plastic. If live, make sure they’re turtle safe. If plastic, watch the turtle to make sure he doesn’t try to eat it. If he does, it will have to go.
  - Hiding spot. This is especially important if you have more than one turtle. Put a couple of terracotta plan pots turned on their sides in the tank, or other hiding places. Just make sure that the opening is wide enough to accommodate the turtle throughout a year of growth so he doesn’t get stuck in it.
  - Random items to climb on or perch on. Just make sure they’re aquarium-safe.

- Aquarium vacuum. Even with a filter, the water will need to be changed occasionally. If you have a good filter, this may only need to be done once a month. DO NOT dump all the water out, scrub it, and refill. You'll kill all your water's good bacteria doing that. Get an aquarium vacuum, suction the bottom for any decayed food, dirt, or fecal matter, and only change out about 25% of the water. If your tank or decor has algae, use a pot scrubber or toothbrush to clean it. DO NOT go buy a pleco fish or other algae eater to help with algae control.

\*We realize the supplies listed aren't exactly cheap, and we wish we had the means to provide these items for every teacher interested in the program. Unfortunately, we struggle to buy our own supplies, so we can't help with the supply items. You could try reaching out to your PTA, start a GoFundMe campaign, or host some other type of fundraiser to purchase some of the required items. We also recommend checking Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace for used tanks, filters, aquarium vacuums or décor. I would NOT purchase a used UVB light, even if you find one. The bulbs only produce UVB rays for about 12 months. The light will still work, but there's no UVB benefit. You have no way of verifying when a bulb was purchased if you buy it used.

## Supplies Needed – Box Turtles

- Depending on how many hatchling box turtles you want to foster, you could use anything from a 10 gallon Sterlite/Rubbermaid tote to a larger under-bed storage type plastic box. The box must NOT be clear. Box turtles do not do well in clear containers. Absolutely no glass tanks will be approved.
- Heat Lamp. Box turtles need a temperature gradient. They need a warm end around 85-90 and a cool end around 70-75. A heat lamp should be placed on one side of the enclosure and should be a wattage high enough to produce that basking spot of around 85-90 degrees. You can use specialty basking lights or regular incandescent household light bulbs to produce this heat. A dome fixture will be needed to house the lightbulb. If your classroom gets below 65 at night, you will also need an infrared heat bulb to keep the enclosure between 65 and 70 at nighttime.
- UVB light. Turtles MUST have UVB to convert it to Vitamin D3. Without Vitamin D3, they cannot absorb calcium properly and can die of Metabolic Bone Disease. We recommend ZooMed or Exo Terra brands. (Please stay away from any swirly/corkscrew shaped bulbs.) A compact UVB bulb can be placed in a dome fixture like your heat lamp, and can either be clipped on the side of the tub or suspended over the tub with a lamp stand made for the fixture.
- Water dish. Box turtles love soaking in shallow water. Many will spend hours in their water. This is also where they prefer to poop and pee. You'll need a soaking dish that they can easily climb in and out of without fear of flipping over. Depending on the size of the hatchling you foster, this could be a peanut butter jar lid or a plant saucer. You'll need to get specifics from us before purchasing so we can make sure you get the right size for your turtle.
- Hide(s). Baby box turtles spend most of their time hiding. You can purchase cute half-logs from PetSmart or you can upcycle plastic cups or plant pots. Simply cut them in half lengthwise and you have an instant hide.
- Dirt. PLAIN dirt/topsoil to use as substrate. You can purchase it from Home Depot for about \$2/bag, and you should need only 1 bag. Make sure it's plain soil – no chemicals, fertilizers, pesticides, manure, etc. Just dirt/soil/forest floor. You'll need about 3-4" of topsoil in your enclosure. Turtles will spend a lot of their time buried into the dirt.
- Sphagnum moss. This holds moisture really well, providing needed humidity, and gives the turtle ground cover that makes them feel more secure. Just sprinkle some around the enclosure. \*Pro tip: don't place it too near the water dish. If any touches the water, it will suck all the water out of the water dish.
- Garden sprayer or spray bottle. Box turtles need about 60% humidity, so you'll need to mist their soil once a day to keep it moist (not wet.)
- Piece of slate or flat rock to feed on. You can put their food on the tile and remove it when they're done eating. Makes for easy cleanup, and the slate or rough stone will help keep their beak filed naturally.
- Fake plants, rocks, small limbs, etc. for décor. Don't place anything – décor, hides, etc. – near the sides of the enclosure. They will use these items to climb out.

## Suggested food list for box turtles.

Box turtles generally prefer protein foods when young. They may or may not eat fruits and vegetables, especially at first. Feel free to keep trying, or rotating through many different options, to get your turtle(s) interested in fruits and vegetables.

The staple of their diet should be a high-quality commercial pellet that we will provide you. Please note that at first, most baby box turtles will refuse any food that isn't moving. You may need to feed the pellets to them in shallow water at first. The movement of water will make the food item appear to be moving and will be more tempting to eat.

Additional foods to try.

### Proteins (should make up about 60% of adult diet, 80% hatchling diet)

- Earthworms
- Canadian Nightcrawlers (available in the fishing section at Walmart)
- Red Wigglers (also available at Walmart)
- Baby wigglers (same as above but very tiny)
- Crickets (also available at Walmart, or at Petsmart/Petco)
- Wax Worms (Petsmart)
- Phoenix Worms/Calci Worms/Black Soldier Fly Larvae (available online at GeorgiaCrickets.com. These are really good worms to feed. Rich in calcium.)
- Blood worms (Petsmart. They're frozen, so you'll need to thaw them out and make sure they're room temp before serving.)
- Mazuri tortoise diet
- Mazuri aquatic turtle diet
- Reptomni turtle diet
- ZooMed turtle diet
- ZooMed canned turtle diet (high in fruit content)
- Omega One turtle diet
- Hikari turtle diet
- *(all turtle diets listed above can be found on Amazon)*
- Fall blend koi fish pellets (available at most pet stores and Amazon)
- Cooked, un-seasoned chicken
- Cooked, un-seasoned beef heart
- Cooked, un-seasoned fish such as salmon, talapia, etc. Watch sodium content. Don't feed anything too high in sodium.
- Cooked, un-seasoned shrimp. Shrimp can be high in sodium, so this should be a treat only.
- Boiled egg (or scrambled in the microwave, no seasoning). You can also feed the shell of the egg - it's a great source of calcium.
- Thawed, room-temp pinky mice (if turtle is small, may want to cut the mice up some)
- **NEVER: bugs from your yard (some are toxic, others may have passed through pesticides), hot dogs, lunch meats, or any meats with high sodium or fat content, dog/cat food, or mealworms (or any other insect/larvae with a hard exoskeleton)**

### Vegetables (should make up 20% of adult diet, 10% hatchling diet)

- Romaine lettuce
- Turnip greens
- Collard greens
- Mustard greens
- Spring mix
- Kale
- Endive

- Dandelions-flowers, leaves, and stems (only get these from a yard that you know has not used any chemicals)
- Prickly Pear cactus pads (without spines)
- Hibiscus flowers
- Rose flowers (petals only never the leaves or stems)
- Zucchini
- Cucumber
- Yellow squash
- Butternut squash
- Pumpkin (just don't feed too much. Pumpkin is a natural laxative)
- Sweet potato
- Carrots (finely chopped)
- Bell peppers (green, yellow, red, orange)
- Mushrooms (white)
- **NEVER: spinach, beets, cauliflower, cabbage, iceberg lettuce, white potatoes, weeds you can't identify, or mushrooms from your yard**

Fruits (should make up 20% of adult diet, 10% hatchling diet)

- Strawberries
- Blueberries
- Blackberries
- Raspberries
- Bananas
- Mangos
- Watermelon
- Cantaloupe
- Honey Dew Melon
- Apple (NO pit or seeds)
- PawPaw Fruit
- Mulberries
- Mango
- Papaya
- **NEVER: citrus fruits, apple seeds/pits, grapes, wild berries you can't 100% identify as safe**

# Hatchling Turtle Foster Program Application

Submit signed application to [turtlerescuems@gmail.com](mailto:turtlerescuems@gmail.com) or by mail to PO Box 1374, Florence, MS 39073

Applicant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Year of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Cell Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

School/Organization Name \_\_\_\_\_

School/Organization Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_ School Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Job Title at School/Organization \_\_\_\_\_

If teacher, what grade? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you interested in Aquatic Hatchlings or Box Turtle Hatchlings? \_\_\_\_\_

How Many Hatchlings Can You Accommodate? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have school permission to house turtle(s) in your classroom? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you currently have a hunting license as mentioned on page 1 above? \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, attach copy. If no, a copy MUST be provided prior to you taking possession of the turtle(s).

Do you already have all the supplies mentioned above? \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, please attach photos. If no, photos of the completed setup will be required prior to you taking possession of the turtle(s).

By signing below, you agree to abide by all terms, guidelines, and rules set forth in this document, communicated verbally or communicated by any other manner by the Central MS Turtle Rescue (CMTR) or the Mississippi Department of Wildlife Fisheries & Parks. You understand that you will be fostering this turtle only until the end of this school year, at which time you will return the turtle(s) to CMTR. You further understand that this turtle is NOT a pet, but is a wild animal that will be returned to the wild at the end of this foster period. You acknowledge that turtles carry salmonella bacteria and are capable of biting, scratching, or causing other harm. You indemnify and hold harmless CMTR from any responsibility or liability in the event that you or one of your students gets injured or becomes ill as a result of this foster arrangement.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature - Applicant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature - School Principal/Organization Head

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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This section is for internal use only

Application Approved By: \_\_\_\_\_ (Signature) Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Turtle(s) assigned:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date Assigned: \_\_\_\_\_

Date Returned: \_\_\_\_\_