

# Central American Wood Turtles

Author: Paul Eversfield

*Rhinoclemmys* spp.

The Central and South American Wood Turtles from the Group *Rhinoclemmys*, like their North American cousins, *Clemmys* spp, are a highly attractive and many would say intelligent & undoubtedly fascinating semi aquatic Turtles.

The group comprises of nine currently recognised species and five sub-species. Their range encompasses the whole of Central America, through to the North of the continent of South America. This range clearly represents Tropical/ sub-tropical habitats, and whilst at altitude, some may experience cooler temperature gradients, in general, they should for the most part be considered tropical in a captive environment

Perhaps, one of the most attractive of this group of animals is the Painted Wood Turtle- (*Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima manni*). In recent years this species has been imported from Central America in some numbers and has become popular as a captive animal. This beautifully marked Turtle is native of Southern Nicaragua, to Northwest Costa Rica:



For some years, I have kept representatives of this group, and consider them very interesting captive charges. The Painted Wood Turtle- (*Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima manni*), which as an adult, measures approx 20cm, females are generally larger than males in this species. For much of the year, they live a terrestrial existence, and only bathe infrequently. However, for good long-term health, humidity needs to be high. I maintain my Wood Turtles at 26 -28 degrees centigrade, and have circa 80-90% humidity. A tropical room measuring 5 metres X 3.5 metres. To keep humidity at the right level, the animals can be kept in small groups of 2/3, in a form of plasterer's bath. I have found a layer of charcoal that is over-layered with bark chips and empty cockleshells works well; this can be soaked, without fouling too quickly. The turtles can bury themselves and create their own space. Clean drinking water is also provided daily in Pot saucers. However, to mate these animals will need deeper water and for this, a separate aquarium set up is necessary.

Feeding this species is a varied diet of Fruit, Vegetable, live insects, and some Dog food. In young, the diet tends to be more insectivorous, which can be supplemented with either

Trout pellets or Cichlid pellets. As the animals get larger, they become much more herbivorous. Fruit and Veg including raw carrot, broccoli, and peas, are taken avidly. Three years ago, I had the pleasure in meeting a German herpetologist, Elmar Meier. He had published a fascinating paper on the breeding of the North American Clemmys group, including the highly endangered Clemmys muhlenbergii. What is significant about his approach is a husbandry protocol, which keeps males and females separate for most of the year. Ideally, animals should be kept on their own. This minimises stress from regular interaction with other turtles. When males are introduced to the female, courtship and subsequent successful coupling greatly increases the production of fertile eggs! This protocol has also been successfully adopted with a number of Asian species, such as the Cuora group. As a consequence, Elmar has managed to breed a good number of species, many for the first time in captivity.

The point of this is to reinforce a protocol I now try to adopt in my own collection. The Rhinoclemmys group I believe are very similar in their behaviour, and in consequence, a similar husbandry technique seems to have very positive results. In the past, I certainly have had the problems many other keepers of these animals have experienced. That is egg retention in adult females, leading to significant problems. This group of Turtles produce typically one or two eggs at a time, which can be relatively huge; 25-30 grams. I believe egg retention can be stress induced and therefore kept separate seems to eliminate this problem.

Again, when the males are kept separate from the female. They can be introduced in an aquarium, which needs to be fairly shallow, 10-12cm. In subdued lighting, the male will often start courtship, which includes waving his head in front of the female and chasing the female around the tank, if receptive, the female allows copulation with little or no aggression. Egg laying follows in a week or so of this event. Some authors recommend 30-45 days of cooling ahead of courtship, however, I think the period of inactivity when the animal are kept separate can work just as well, without fluctuating temperature. What is however very important is the lighting, whilst UV radiation is beneficial, these animals tend to be very crepuscular and they will seek shade for long periods, often days at a time.

This species is being bred by hobbyists in the USA, and Europe and their offspring can be "stunning", a well marked hatchling of the Painted Wood Turtle, is arguably one of the most beautiful Turtles in the world.

*Further reading;*

- Turtles, Tortoises and Terrapins. A checklist, Welch. ISBN 1 85913 030 5
- Schidkroten, Harald Artner & Elmar Meier, ISBN 3- 931587-42-8
- Practical Encyclopedia of Keeping & Breeding Tortoises & Freshwater Turtles, A.C. Highfield, ISBN 1-873943-11-3
- Keeping and Breeding Freshwater Turtles, Russ Gurley, ISBN 0-9638130-3-X.