

# Asian Box Turtles - Part 1

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The genus *Cuora*

Derived from the Malay word *Kura*, which means Hard-shelled Turtle, is a group of semi-aquatic chelonia from the Southeast Asian region. The group comprises currently nine distinct species; with a further six recognised sub-species. Their overall range encompasses the Indian sub-continent, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, throughout the rest of South East Asia, including Indonesia and Southern China. In captivity, the most common species encountered is the Malayan Box Turtle (*Cuora amboinensis*). In fact, this is probably the most common fresh water turtle in most of its natural range. A well-developed plastral hinge, permitting the shell to be closed completely can easily identify it. This distinction is shared by all the species in the group and is similar to the *Terrepene* group, which occurs in North America:



The carapace of this species is usually olive brown or blackish brown. The plastron is either yellow or cream with a single black blotch on each scute. A very distinct bright yellow longitudinal stripe runs either side of the head.

## Biology:

The species is very adaptable, and occurs in a wide range of tropical habitats. These range from, ponds, lakes, mangrove swamps, fresh water marshes and river margins. It has also adapted well to man-made habitats such as rice paddies, canals and stock ponds. Being semi-aquatic, it can be found in both water and land. Hatchlings and juveniles, tend to be more aquatic. They are excellent swimmers, and forage for aquatic vegetation, insects, molluscs, and carrion. On land they feed on fruit, fungi, and earthworms.

Mating occurs in water, with females laying their eggs in the usual flask shaped nest on land. Females can produce several clutches in a year, with a typical clutch being 2/3 eggs. However, large females can produce up to 6 eggs in a single clutch. The elongated eggs are hard shelled and brittle. Incubation period ranges from 70-85 days, at a temp of between 25-30 C.

In common with many other freshwater turtles from South East Asia, Man commonly eats the flesh of this species and very significant numbers are being collected from the wild for this trade. As a consequence, the species has also been frequently exported for the pet

trade in Europe and America. Though currently considered widespread and in certain populations "common". The current levels of exploitation from the wild are unsustainable! For this reason with care and good husbandry, the captive breeding of the species should be fostered in order to take some of the pressure off the wild populations.

I have maintained a breeding group of this species for a number of years and consider them fascinating and beautiful animals. I keep three males and three females in a tropical room in my garden. They have a large Glass terrarium, 244cm x 61cm x 31cm. This is split 50/50 water and land. The water is maintained at 26 degrees centigrade and is filtered with an internal power filter. The filter medium is Charcoal and Zeolite. Regular, weekly water change is also undertaken. The Top of the Terrarium is open to allow for maximum ventilation. Atmosphere in the tropical room has typically 80/85% humidity. A varied diet of Pellet fish food, fruit and vegetable is offered daily. Additional calcium and vitamin is provided once a week.

The turtles thrive in this environment and breed most years. Breeding is usually initiated in the UK summer. The males start courting with a head bobbing around the female in the water. One has to be careful because if the female is not receptive, aggression can follow. One of my females once experienced a nasty injury from such an incident. After a successful coupling, the female will nest approx. four weeks later. Mine seem to lay just one egg at a time, which is huge! Typically weighing 28-30 grams. Two weeks later a second egg is laid. Incubation at 29-30 degree centigrade lasts 80 days and at hatching, a 25-gram baby emerges:



The neonates are kept in shallow water and after a few days fed on a diet of earthworms, and fish pellets. Whilst considered common at one time, these delightful creatures are exquisite captive specimens which should be recognised as precious.