Handling Reptiles Safely (Part 1): Proper Handling

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the proper way to handle your pet

Many people cite the "fact" that reptiles can't be handled as a reason for not liking them as pets. The truth is that many reptiles can be handled and many can actually be tamed to a certain degree. However, it is important that you always handle your reptiles correctly, both for your safety and theirs.

Starting Out Right

As with any pet, you can't simply bring your reptile home and expect to be able to handle it that same day. You must allow your reptile some time to acclimate to its new home, and this can take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. During the initial time period, you should only go near the habitat to clean it or to give your reptile food or water.

Once your reptile is accustomed to seeing you near the habitat, you can start to get it used to being handled by lifting it gently within the enclosure. Put your hand under it to scoop it up, and allow it to climb off your hand if it wants to. Only try this for a couple minutes three or four times a day. After your reptile is used to being held in this manner, you can attempt to hold and gently restrain it outside the enclosure.

Taking your time during this process will be less stressful for your reptile, and it will help to facilitate the taming process. Always be attentive to your reptile's behaviors, and don't force it to interact with you or handle it extensively before a level of trust is built. Doing that will only cause it to dislike being handled.

Proper and Improper Handling Methods

Proper handling of your reptile is important to keep both you and your reptile safe and unharmed. The following tips will teach you the correct methods for handling reptiles:

- Always support both the body length and weight fully. For larger reptiles, this may take two people.
- Make sure your motions are slow and calm. Smooth movements and a confident demeanor will make your reptile feel safer. Quick, jerky movements and nervousness will cause your reptile to react

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negatively to your handling.

- Always be aware of possible sources of stress for your reptile, and always watch your surroundings closely. Even tame reptiles can react badly to loud noises, large groups of people, or anything else they may find upsetting.
- Spend time with your reptile to learn what its behavior means. Knowing your reptile's warning signs will help you to interact in a positive way and prevent injuries, both to you and your reptile.
- Always stroke a reptile from head to tail in the direction of the scales. Petting backwards can actually damage the scales of some species.

- Never wiggle your fingers in front of an omnivorous or carnivorous reptile. Reptiles are not domesticated animals like dogs and cats, and they may view your moving fingers as prey moving around in front of them.

The following things are improper handling methods that may result in injury of you or your reptile and will certainly stress it:

- Failing to support it or only using a few fingers to hold it
- Allowing it to dangle freely in the air
- Turning it upside down or in other unnatural positions where it is not safe or comfortable
- Smelling like prey, which may result in your reptile biting you

Some species, such as bearded dragons, red-eared sliders, iguanas, American species of box turtles, and a number of snakes, are well-known as reptiles that like to be handled. However, as with any other pet, each reptile will have its own temperament, and just because most members of a species like to be handled doesn't mean that all of them will. Handling can be stressful, and some reptiles will never adjust to it enough to eliminate that stress. With these reptiles, limit handling as much as possible.

Signs That You Aren't Doing It Right

If you know how to read your reptile's behavior, you'll know when it is telling you that it doesn't want to be handled or you're doing it wrong. Some signs that your reptile may give you include:

- Heavy breathing with lots of ribcage movement
- Squirming, fussiness, and repeated attempts to escape by a normally tame reptile
- Clawing and scratching at you to get away
- Thrashing around
- Wrapping tightly around a part of your body (snake)
- Flailing legs about in midair (turtle or tortoise)
- Hissing
- Gaping (opening mouth inside)

If your reptile does these things, it is angry, uncomfortable, agitated, or in pain, and we recommend that you put it back in its enclosure immediately. Failing to acknowledge the warning signs can result in injury to the reptile or yourself.

Children and Reptiles

Children can interact with reptiles, but an adult must closely supervise the interaction. Before you even think about handing the reptile to the child, you must instruct the child on proper handling methods and demonstrate them. Make the child sit down first, and never hand a reptile to a child that is obviously frightened of it. Not only will this fear be communicated to the reptile, making it nervous, but it means that the child will be more likely to scream or drop the reptile if it does bite or otherwise frighten her. Failing to properly prepare a child to hold a reptile can be stressful and dangerous for both of them.

Will I Get Bit?

It is highly likely that yes, at some point as a reptile owner, you will get bitten by your reptile. When it happens, don't scream or try to throw the reptile. React calmly and quietly, and, if possible, put whatever the reptile is biting back in the enclosure with the reptile. In many cases this will be enough to make the reptile let go. If it doesn't, try dripping a small amount of (drinking) alcohol into its mouth.

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You can minimize your chances of a bite by doing the following things:

- Don't frighten the reptile.
- Don't startle the reptile.
- Don't attempt to handle it when it's getting ready to shed.
- Recognize warning signs that your reptile is getting nervous or agitated and put it back in its enclosure if you see them.
- Don't handle your reptile when you or your hands smell like prey (e.g. after handling mealworms, crickets, mice, or other possible prey).
- Avoid loud areas when you're handling your reptile.

The Danger of Salmonella

All reptiles can infect humans with salmonella. This is because salmonella is part of the normal flora in their intestinal tract, and it is always being shed in their feces. If you pick up the reptile, clean its cage, or handle any of its accessories, you are getting salmonella on your hands. Failing to wash your hands after handling means that you are exposing yourself to salmonella when you touch things, such as food, that are going into your mouth. Salmonella is generally fairly treatable, but it can be a very serious infection for the elderly, for infants, and for people with compromised immune systems.

To ensure that you aren't exposing yourself or your family to salmonella every time you handle your reptiles, make sure to do the following things:

- Wash your hands thoroughly with hot, soapy water before and immediately after handling your reptile or anything in its habitat.
- Don't eat, drink, or smoke while handling your reptile.
- Never kiss your reptile.
- Never prepare food after handling reptiles without first washing your hands.
- Always supervise children handling reptiles, and make sure they wash their hands immediately afterwards.

In Conclusion

Unlike cats and dogs, reptiles are not domesticated animals. They should be considered wild animals, and when considering their actions and behaviors, you should interpret them as such. However, this doesn't mean that you can't interact with a reptile. It just means you have to use your common sense. If your lizard is thrashing around in your hands and clawing at you, it's a pretty good guess that it doesn't really want to be handled right at that time. The more time you spend with your reptile, the more comfortable it will become with you, and the longer you will be able to handle it.

Are all reptiles able to be tamed? The answer to that is a resounding no. Reptiles are not bred for their calm, cuddly temperaments, and there are many that do not want to be touched. Others will only eat food out of your hand without allowing you to hold them, and there are some that will truly enjoy being held and stroked. Just remember to take it slow, use proper handling methods, respect your reptile's natural inclinations, and always be alert both to your reptile's behaviors and the environment around you while handling your reptile.

Part 2: Handling Tips

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