

# Big-Headed Turtles

## *Platysternon megacephalum*



Big-headed Turtles are great climbers and will spend a lot of time searching their enclosures for food and a new resting place. Photo by Russ Gurley.

**Comments:** Big-headed Turtles are surly and independent and exhibit a life history quite unlike any other turtle, lumbering up and down mountain streams and waterfalls and even climbing shrubs and small trees in search of prey.

### **Taxonomy:**

*Platysternon megacephalum megacephalum* Gray, 1831 Asian Big-headed Turtle

*Platysternon megacephalum peguense* Gray, 1870 Burmese Big-headed Turtle

*Platysternon megacephalum shiui* Ernst & McCord, 1987 Vietnamese Big-headed Turtle

**Distribution:** *Platysternon m. megacephalum* is only found in China. *Platysternon m. peguense* is found in Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. *Platysternon m. shiui* is found in northern Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

**Adult Size:** Big-headed Turtles are typically in the 5 to 7" (13 to 18 cm) range with some specimens growing to 11" (28 cm).

**Captive Care:** In nature, Big-headed Turtles inhabit solitary pools associated with cold mountain streams. Therefore, their captive environment should reflect this habitat and its characteristics.



The mountain stream habitat of *Platysternon megacephalum* in Vietnam. Photo by Torsten Blanck.



Care must be taken when handling these turtles. Photo by Artur Tomasezk.

Indoors, Big-headed Turtles behave similarly to other aggressive species such as *Carettochelys*, *Claudius*, *Erymnochelys*, and *Staurotypus*. There is a definite need to separate individuals so they don't fight. Males are especially aggressive and often attack each other violently. Interestingly, they often ignore other species kept with them. We suggest a medium Waterland Tub or 4' to 6' stock tank for each turtle. The water should be kept shallow at 5 to 6" (13 to 15 cm), cool (68 to 74° F) and oxygenated. We offer them double the amount of filtration to ensure that their water is clean and highly oxygenated. We use sand as a substrate and

offer them lots of driftwood and pieces of slate resting on bricks for exploring and hiding. Though they don't seem interested in basking, basking spots are established over the piles of slate. These spots are maintained at about 85° F (29° C) with the use of a 75-watt bulb.

Outside, we have used medium Waterland Tubs for single specimens. These enclosures should receive shade for much of the day, especially in the warmer months. The water is pumped via a submersible pond pump through a pre-filter and into a small water fountain to add oxygen to the pond. We add lots of slate, piles of rock, driftwood, and live aquatic plants. In these outdoor ponds, they often wedge themselves into pockets or folds of pond liners and into rock crevices.

Care must be taken that the Big-heads' outdoor enclosure is in a shady area, especially in areas where the summers are quite warm. In addition to the pond fountains, we cover the surface of their pond with a layer of aquatic plants and on the hottest days, we spray water onto the surface of the water with a hose or sprinkler to beat the heat and to add more oxygen to the system.

**Feeding:** Bigheads feed aggressively on earthworms, fish, and thawed rodents and will acclimate to take commercial pellets as part of a varied diet.

**Common Health Problems:** Obesity. We suggest offering Bigheads lots of creative spaces, used as exercise areas, and feed them small meals four or five times a week. The combination of activity and reduced feeding has produced healthy, alert specimens with no signs of captivity-related obesity or stress.

Big-headed Turtles often display scars or injuries from fighting. One common trademark of an individual kept with too many others is a lack of the tip of the tail. Apparently, when confined together for any length of time, they lash out with their sharp jaws at the closest turtle's vulnerable parts.



A young Asian Big-headed Turtle, *Platysternon m. megacephalum*, spotted in Hong Kong. Photo by Artur Tomasezk.

**Breeding:** There have been very few successful captive breedings of Big-headed Turtles in recent years. Only a few private breeders have had the pleasure of seeing beautiful hatchling Big-headed Turtles emerge from eggs. The babies have beautiful orange plastrons and can be bright green or bright orange, no doubt an evolutionary result of resembling the beautiful fallen leaves in their clear streams in nature. They reportedly pip and emerge quite quickly, literally popping out of the egg when hatching (Tiedemann-Bickel, pers. com.). In addition to being quite active and secretive, hatchling and young Big-headed Turtles will squeak loudly if they are handled or disturbed! Hopefully, the few captive-hatched specimens being produced will slowly make their way into herpetoculture and numbers in captivity will grow.

### Works Cited and Suggested Reading

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\* *Platysternon megacephalum* is listed on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).