

*Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima* (Gray, 1855) – Ornate Wood Turtle – Lisa Weiss  
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*Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima incisa* - Honduran Wood Turtle  
*Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima manni* - Painted Wood Turtle  
*Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima rogerbarbouri* - Western Mexican Wood Turtle  
*Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima pulcherrima* - Guerrero Wood Turtle



**INTRODUCTION:** Considered to be one of the most beautifully patterned of all turtles, *Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima* has become widely available through the reptile trade in recent years. Often called Central American Wood Turtles or C.A. Ornate Woods, members of this species are easily and cheaply purchased from dealers, breeders and even mass-market pet store chains such as Petco and Petsmart, where they are frequently misidentified and inappropriately housed. Of the four recognized subspecies, only *Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima manni* and *Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima incisa* are commonly encountered;

*Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima rogerbarbouri* and *Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima pulcherrima* are rarely kept in institutional or private collections.

**DESCRIPTION:** *Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima* is native to the western coast of Mexico and Central America, from Sonora south to Costa Rica. Found in the southernmost part of this range, *R. p. manni* is the most colorful subspecies. From some areas within their home range, these turtles display brilliant red-and-yellow eyespots on a dark carapace, with vivid alternating bands of color on the underside margin of the carapace, and intricate patterns of red stripes adorning the green head. *R. p. incisa* are considerably less showy, with carapace coloration varying from olive to brown and the eyespot markings drastically reduced or absent. Both subspecies are of medium size, with a body type intermediate between that of a slider and a box turtle. *R. p. incisa* tend toward a flatter profile than the more domed *R. p. manni*. Males are typically smaller than females, with longer, thicker tails and the vent located beyond the margin of the carapace.

**HOUSING:** Both subspecies are primarily terrestrial, preferring woodland and forest habitats near water. Indoor environments for these turtles should be kept moderately warm and humid. Frequent misting is suggested to keep the habitat from drying out. Daytime ambient temperatures of 75 – 82 deg F (24 -28 C) will promote good activity levels and appetite. Ultratherm or other under-tank heating pads can be used to keep the soil at a comfortable temperature, but if used should only be under a portion of the habitat to allow the animals to move to cooler areas if

*Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima* - Ornate Wood Turtle

- **Location** - Mexico - Central America
- **Habitat** - Woodland and forest near water
- **Size** - 20 cm (8 inches)
- **Diet** - omnivorous - fruits, leafy greens and invertebrates
- **Conservation Status** - No special status
- **Threats** - habitat loss, pollution, pet trade
- **Alternate Names** - Mexican Forest Turtle, Painted Wood Turtle

desired. . Both *R. p. incisa* and *R. p. manni* sometimes enjoy basking; this can be facilitated by placing a 45 - 60 watt lamp 12 - 18 inches above one end of the enclosure (temperature under the basking light should reach approximately 95 degrees F (35 C) , taking care to provide a darker, cooler retreat at the other end. If the turtles are maintained indoors for long periods, a full-spectrum fluorescent reptile light should also be provided. Since *Rhinoclemmys* do not hibernate, suitable housing must be available year-round. Indoor winter quarters can be arranged in large plastic storage tubs, partially covered to preserve humidity and provide security. A 3-to-4-inch deep 50/50 mixture of potting soil and small landscaping bark works well as a substrate, and areas of damp sphagnum moss and dead leaves will be much appreciated by the turtles. Although *Rhinoclemmys* will use hide-boxes or shelters, they seem to prefer to partially burrow under the substrate to rest and hide, often flipping damp soil or leaves over their backs until only the neck and head are visible.

Water should be made available to them at all times. These turtles will soak and drink daily, and a shallow plastic pan or large plant saucer should be provided. If smaller temporary quarters prohibit full-time access to the soaking tray, the turtles will readily learn to drink from a small, heavy bowl sunk into a corner of the enclosure. The sight of water being poured into the bowl will usually stimulate them to investigate, and they will quickly adjust to drinking regularly at this "waterhole". Another advantage to providing a drinking bowl is that the water will be cleaner than that in the soaking tray. In outdoor enclosures, a larger water pan or small pond will be eagerly used by both subspecies. Expect to change the water often, as the turtles will usually defecate when they bathe.

Wherever possible, outdoor housing should be provided. In California, the author keeps *Rhinoclemmys* in outdoor pens from late spring through September or October. Large trees provide dappled shade for much of the day, with periods of sunshine in the morning and late afternoon. The enclosures are planted with low shrubs, daylilies and groundcover, with a layer of bark mulch over the soil and scattered piles of leaves for burrowing and hiding. A 45-minute shower (provided by garden sprinklers) is the turtles' favorite daily event. During this afternoon "rain", they will emerge to eat, bathe, mate, or simply walk around. They also expertly dig for worms attracted to the surface by the moisture.

**FEEDING:** *Rhinoclemmys pulcherrima* can be offered a diet similar to that of North American box turtles. They are agreeable and hearty diners, seldom missing a meal or rejecting a new food item. A broad variety of greens, weeds, vegetables and fruits should make up roughly 80% of the diet. Some preferred foods are Romaine and plantain, dandelion, squash, corn, grated carrot, tomato, berries, melon, banana, mango, pear, apples and grapes. The turtles will eagerly accept live foods, also cooked lean chicken or fish, and occasional additions of prepared reptile foods such as Mazuri or Reptomin. Food should be dusted weekly with a quality herp vitamin supplement, and with Rep-Cal or similar 1 - 2 times weekly (more often for youngsters and breeding adults.) The unanimous top favorite food is earthworms, which are devoured with greedy gusto. *R. p. incisa*, in particular, will spend hours diligently digging for worms. Judging by the obvious efficiency and success of this pursuit, it seems likely that worms have a significant place in the natural diet of these turtles.

**GENERAL HEALTH:** an experienced reptile vet should see newly acquired animals. The turtles should be examined for parasite problems, shell rot and respiratory symptoms. Once established, *R. pulcherrima* are not difficult to maintain in good health, so long as appropriate accommodations and diet are provided.

These are fascinating and rewarding turtles, generally adapting easily to new environments. Both subspecies can become quite tame, and *R. p. incisa* are particularly active, fearless, inquisitive and outgoing.

It should be noted that turtle and tortoise care research is ongoing. As new information becomes available we share this on the World Chelonian Trust web site at [www.chelonia.org](http://www.chelonia.org). Serious keepers find it to be a benefit to have the support of others who keep these species. Care is discussed in our free online email community, which may be joined from the web address above. Please contact us about the many benefits of becoming a member of the World Chelonian Trust.

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