

Does Your Turtle or Tortoise Need a Beak Trim?



**Eastern Box Turtle Requiring a Beak Trim, Left © Imgur.com, Red Eared Slider with Overgrown Beak, Right. © Sergiu Bacioiu.*

All turtles and tortoises, which are collectively known as chelonians, have hardened, keratinized beaks (much like birds do in that they are comprised of the same material, keratin). These beaks, found both in chelonians and birds is more formally known as the “**rhamphotheca**”. These beaks grow throughout the turtle or tortoise’s lifetime, and, depending on the species and their natural history, can help them better break down and ingest their preferred foods.

When we keep these amazing animals in captivity, or as pets, however, there may be some cases where their beaks may need to periodically be trimmed or clipped. In the long-term, providing the correct and suitable enclosure, while preventing malnutrition, as well as ensuring the proper habitat and husbandry, proper diets and nutrition, utilizing the right substrates, and providing additional furnishings or other objects within the enclosure such as flat slate rocks, a “cuttlefish bone”, or other foraging activities, can all help keep your pet turtle or tortoise’s beak trimmed and worn down naturally over time.

Oftentimes, however, and in the absence of these optimal conditions in captivity, there come times and cases where we may need to cut or trim our turtle or tortoise’s beaks for their benefit. So how does one know when a turtle or tortoise’s beak might need a trim? How can you tell? This will depend quite a bit on each species, as well as other factors and considerations.

Whether or not to trim your turtle or tortoise’s beak can depend, in some cases, on the species. Generally, the top, or upper portion the beak should be about even with the rest of the jawline and bottom, or lower jaw. This, however, can depend on the species, and some species can have longer or shorter upper and/or lower jaws. Do not attempt to trim a species’ beak if that species naturally, or normally has an elongated beak! In some cases, this can also be a sexually dimorphic trait as well between males and females.

If, however, your turtle or tortoise is a species which can be determined to have an abnormally overgrown beak, and thereby impacting its ability to open and/or close their mouths, breath or respire naturally, or impacting their overall ability to eat and to gain proper nutrition, it may be time to consider a beak trim! Oftentimes, an overgrown beak can also give your turtle or tortoise a “duck-billed” appearance as well, or the appearance of an oversized “nose”. Overgrown beaks are especially

commonly seen in the European Testudo/Agrionemys tortoise group (i.e. Russians, Greeks, Hermann's, and Mediterranean tortoises), other tortoise species such as sulcatas or African spurred tortoises, and as well as box turtles. Luckily, doing so can be relatively easy as long as a few considerations are kept in mind!

Alternatively, if one is not experienced or comfortable enough to trim your chelonian's beak on one's own, your reptile or other exotic animal veterinarian will likely be able to, reptile specialty stores, or other more experienced hobbyists, enthusiasts, or individuals in one's area. Whenever in doubt, consult with any of these other experienced sources so as to prevent injury to your pet turtle or tortoise!

In this tutorial, we will cover how to trim your turtle or tortoise's beak, as needed!

Materials Needed:

- One, or two people, depending on the size, species, and individual tolerance of the turtle or tortoise with a beak to be trimmed.
- One pair of nail clippers. These do not need to be fancy or expensive, and can include a pair of human nail clippers, puppy or dog/kitten or cat nail clippers, or other types of nail clippers.



-Other tools may also be used, as needed, including file sets and/or Dremel tools or sanding bits. Using a nail file can be more tedious and time consuming, but can work if your turtle or tortoise has the patience. These are best used on larger animals where other clippers might not be large or strong enough to clip beaks from these animals due to the size and/or thickness of their beaks. A Dremel or sanding tool may also be the fastest means of beak trimming as well.

-One bottle of iodine or styptic powder, in the event of bleeding or over-trimming of the beak.

Steps for Beak Trimming



**Normal, Healthy Tortoise Beak, Left, © TortoiseAddiction. Overgrown Tortoise Beak, Right. © Mark Rosenthal.*

1. The first step will be ensuring that your turtle or tortoise can be safely and appropriately handled and restrained, depending on the species and type of animal, and is calm and not thrashing or moving about excessively. We want to prevent undue or excess stress and injury for both the animal, and to us as much as possible. This is where two or more people may be required in some cases with larger reptiles. Holding your chelonian still, and keeping each of their feet steady are the goals of this first step. Covering them with a blanket or towel may also help them feel more secure as well.

2. This step is optional, but if it helps you, use the white coloring pencil or other marking device to draw a visible line across the point where your chelonian's beak is to be trimmed. This may help keep the beak evenly trimmed on both sides, as well as prevent trimming up too far.



**Technique for properly grasping a turtle or tortoise by the head, if needed. © TortoiseAddiction.com*

3. Many turtles and tortoises might not enjoy having their beaks trimmed, and will pull their heads and/or necks into their shells. If your turtle or tortoise's head needs to be held during this process, firmly yet gently grasp them with one's thumb and pointer finger just behind the jawbones on each side of their head. If your turtle or tortoise has to be held by the head, ensure that the eyes do not bulge and/or the eyelids start to turn purple, and that they are still able to breathe.

Alternatively, some turtles and tortoises can be handled more freely, depending on the individual and

the species' capabilities when it comes to being able to, or not, withdrawing their heads into their shells. In many cases, the beak can still be trimmed and reached when their heads are withdrawn or tucked in; however, use some caution as to not poke their eyes or nares (nostrils).



© Dudley Zoo and Castle.

4. Gently, yet firmly hold your turtle or tortoise's shell against one's chest, and with the left hand and/or middle and ring fingers, hold the front legs out of the way. As soon as it can be reached begin clipping or trimming from the right or left side, always with the tips of the trimmers facing towards the front of the beak. Clipping or trimming a turtle or tortoise's beak is much like cutting a thickened human toenail, except it is more brittle, and the sides being thinner and easier to clip than the front.

5. Continue clipping or trimming along the overgrown portions of the beak until one reaches about the upper and lower jawline evenly, or otherwise where the line was drawn using the colored pencil. Use caution to ensure that your turtle or tortoise's skin flaps along the margins and outer edges do not get clipped or caught in the trimmers. Smooth an even out the edges using a nail file or Dremel or sanding tool.



© TortoiseAddiction.com. Note that the tool used may be a stainless steel cuticle trimmer, as pictured, or a Dremel tool.

6. The process of clipping or trimming your turtle or tortoise's beak should usually take at least several minutes, but can be expedited and much faster and quicker using a Dremel or other sanding tool on low to medium settings.

7. A final step which might be good to undertake would be to rinse your turtle or tortoise under lukewarm water after the beak trim is complete. They may not appreciate that either, but rinsing them afterwards could help remove any fecal matter (should they defecate), or any shards of beak material

left behind.

And there one has it! Trimming or clipping your turtle or tortoise's beak can often be a relatively easy process once one gains a little practice and experience in doing so, and knows what to look for. But how often should their beaks be trimmed following this? Ideally, their beaks should be regularly monitored and maintained so as to prevent overgrowth in the first place. Over the long-term, providing adequate and abrasive substrates in your chelonian's enclosure, such as a flat sheet of slate for them to wear down their beaks while eating, or perhaps including a "cuttlefish bone" as well as other forms of enrichment to help them better and more naturally wear down their beaks on their own should be among the considerations made by the keeper or pet owner for the overall long term health and happiness of their pet turtle or tortoise.



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To see a video tutorial on how to trim your turtle or tortoise's beak using the quickest means with a Dremel tool, see the following tutorial from Kamp Kenan as well:

[How to trim a Tortoise Beak and Nails - YouTube](#)