

Blackberry's Trip to the Vet

story and photos by Ann Hirschfeld



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4 months later

This past fall I was feeding the reptiles when I found one of my female pancake tortoises had a vicious cut on her neck. It was more of a tear in the shape of an 'L' and flapped open exposing tissue underneath. It was bad enough that my tortoise was hurt but she was also one of my most prolific breeders. This happened to her a year before but it had been a very fresh wound when I discovered it. I was able to get it back in place, keep it clean and in tact until it healed. This time the flap of skin was sticking out and had bunched together. It was dried out enough that I was unable to do anything with it. It is still a mystery how Blackberry got the same injury again but I suspect an overly aggressive male.

I didn't quite know what to do for her. If I tried to do what I had done the previous year it would heal with a big chunk of skin sticking out. It was certain to give her trouble in the future and probably catch and tear open again on the edge of her carapace. I briefly thought of sterilizing cuticle scissors and cutting off the skin flap myself but thought better of it. I'm sure that would have hurt poor Blackberry to no end. Not to mention bleed like crazy and be in danger of getting infected. This injury was clearly out of my area of expertise.

I was scheduled to take my dog to my vet, Dr. Carter Smith, at Ellisville Veterinary Hospital the next day. He has been great with my mammals. If he doesn't know something he is immediately nose deep in a journal or book trying to find the answer. I thought what the heck, it couldn't hurt to ask his opinion. He was fascinated with Blackberry's predicament and had just the solution. He seemed to be excited to deal with something out of the ordinary.

The following day I brought the tortoise in and I was able to watch the procedure. Actually, he needed an extra pair of hands. My ability to get a tort to stick out its head and hold it steady came in handy too. He had a piece of equipment that surgically cut and cauterized tissue. The pancake tortoise had to be resting on a grounding plate. This prevented her from receiving any type of shock because the knife is heated with the help of electric current.



Grounding Blackberry

The trick was holding her head out while keeping her plastron on the plate. I had to manage all this and keep my fingers out of the way of the hot knife. This was the hard part but once everything was in place it took less than a second to slice that nasty piece of skin off. There was no blood at all and Blackberry didn't even flinch. I knew I'd done the right thing by bringing her in. It would heal correctly and there was very little chance of infection. All without causing her pain. Plus it broke up Dr. Smith's day!



Post procedure