Reptile Brumation
by
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When people think of hibernation, most imagine bears in caves taking a long winter sleep. Did you know, however, that reptiles like Desert Tortoises and Red Eared Sliders, have a similar behavior called brumation? In the wild, these animals deal with cold temperatures by digging burrows or finding safe hiding places and slowing their metabolisms to a bare minimum. Some aqautic species, like sliders, will even brumate underwater, only periodically coming up for a breath before dropping back to the bottom of a pond. Brumation is a survival technique for harsh conditions, and in some species, is involved in stimulating reproductive activity in the spring. Captive pet reptiles that are not allowed to brumate will probably not survive as long as their wild counterparts. During brumation, reptiles are technically awake but their metabolism slows to the point where they do not move, barely burn calories, and hardly breathe.

So say you have a 70 year old tortoise in the family that slows down every year around September, looking for a quiet place to sit still for 3-4 months? Tortoise owners often have to create an indoor space, a hibernaculum, so their pet can brumate annually. Hibernaculums don't have to be anything fancy, but require some creativity. Most reptiles will fit in a large rubbermaid type bin with several holes drilled through the tops and sides for ventilation. The bin is packed with dry bedding like Carefresh litter, and the tortoise is safely tucked away for the winter. Cool ambient temperature is essential for safe brumation and needs to be kept at less than 60 degrees, ideally between 40-50 degrees, to ensure a low enough metabolism to prevent excessive weight loss. Here in Northern California, garages are often cold enough for hibernaculums, but sometimes they may be placed in the refrigerator drawer if there are no other options. In February or March, the hibernaculums are moved into warmer temperatures and the reptiles slowly begin to resume their normal activity.