

Red-eared Terrapin/Slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*): Care Advice Sheet

Aquatic turtles are popular pets, but also are one of the most difficult of all reptiles to maintain. Terrapins range from Central to South America, through Mexico right to areas of Brazil. Colonies have also been noticed in Ohio, West Virginia and Kentucky.

Longevity

If kept under the proper conditions Red-eared Terrapins can live for up to 40 years although their life span in captivity is usually 30 years or less.

Sexing

Small hatchlings are very difficult to sex with accuracy. However, mature males are often smaller than the females and develop longer claws on their front legs in comparison to that of a female. The tail of the male is also a lot wider and longer than that of the female. These creatures start off being the size of a ten pence coin, eventually reaching 8 - 10 inches at adulthood.

Diet

Avoid fatty foods or large quantities of red meat as this may result in nutritional problems in later life.

Any diet should be regularly varied. Suitable components include earthworms, white bait, sprats, broad leaf watercress, prawns in shell, snails, raw rabbit, chicken and turkey, crab sticks, cockles, spiders, dead mice and pinkies, kidney and liver. It is wise to supplement the diet with a source of Vitamin A and a calcium phosphorous balancer containing vitamin D (E.g. Arkvits®, Vetark UK) A small amount of vegetable matter may be taken.

Feeding tanks

A separate feeding tank can be provided to help control dirty water; however, it is extremely time consuming, often messy, and obviously requires the filling and emptying of a separate tank or bowl each feeding session. This also involves a lot of extra handling for the turtles, which can result in stress.

Housing

Terrapins grow very fast and can quickly outgrow a small fish tank. It is often far cheaper to go for a larger tank in the first place. For two adult terrapins a 120cm to 150cm (4-5 feet) tank would be sufficient. Indoor pools are also suitable for terrapins.

Land (Haul out) areas

Two land areas should be available. One for basking with a radiant heat source above it. The other area should be away from the heat source, to allow the terrapin to cool its body temperature.

Vivarium Size

A rule of thumb for minimum cage size is that the combined size of all residents' carapaces should not exceed 25% of the cage's floor surface area. Floor surface area does not include any areas that the turtle cannot rest on.

Outdoor pools can be used in the hot summer months but the terrapins should always be brought inside on chilly nights and during the colder months. It is crucial that animals are not released into the wild and that outdoor enclosures are secure and will not allow escape. Where local populations of Red-eared Sliders have become established in the wild across Europe, significant damage has been done to local reptile and amphibian populations.

Underwater Burrowing

Some turtles like to burrow into the tank bottom. A layer of sand to a depth of about 30 to 40 mm placed on the tank baseplate can be offered so these turtles can express this natural behavior.

Heat Source

Heat sources should be provided in the form of an under tank heater and a basking light (e.g. zoomed: Powersun). Full-spectrum lighting should be available for around 12 hours a day, and turned off at night.

For the water, a thermostatically controlled water heater is ideal. A submersible aquarium heater should also be used if the water temperature cannot be properly maintained by the other two sources.

Temperature

The water temperature should be in the region of 22 - 25°C (72 - 77°F). A basking area should be available with the temperature ranging from 28 - 31°C (82 - 86°F).

Water Temperature

Abrupt changes in water temperature can kill turtles; therefore, make sure the water temperature after cleaning is similar to the pre-cleaning temperature. De-chlorination of the water is not necessary, as chlorinated water may help keep bacterial levels down.

Water should be as deep as the width of the widest turtle's shell so that if overturned, the turtle will be able to right itself and avoid drowning.

UV Light Source

Terrapins benefit from full spectrum lighting (e.g. a self ballasted Mercury Vapour lamp : Zoomed - Powersin or a > UVB 5.0% UVB tube light). This should be left on for 8 to 12 hours a day and replaced every 6 months unless otherwise stated by the manufacturer.

Filtration

It is crucial to keep the water clean. Without adequate filtration the water will acquire a heavy burden of potentially infective bacteria that can overwhelm turtles. Under gravel filters do not work very well.

However, external canister type filters that use a foam filtration medium are very good.

External canisters ensure good water circulation and a high standard of water purity. By using an effective filter, the water will be clearer, smell better, and it will also reduce the manual labor of more frequent water changes. Good-quality mechanical and biologic filtration is required.

The waste that needs to be removed is far bulkier than that produced by fish, and will soon clog up the fine filter wool supplied as standard with most filter units intended for fish. This wool material can be removed and instead add extra foam or coarse granular media, which is better suited to turtle maintenance conditions.

It is vital that the water in tanks and ponds is well oxygenated. This helps to keep the bacteria that live in the filters and that digest waste alive and functioning at peak efficiency. Air stones can be installed to assist aeration.

Outdoor Enclosures

Keeping turtles outdoors is more likely to duplicate its natural environment. It is also the only practical way to provide a large swimming space for adult turtles. Outdoor enclosures should have shade available. An outdoor pond can be as simple as a child's plastic wading pool with rock or cinder block islands, or floating logs or cork boards that the turtles can bask on. Many water turtles actually spend a lot of time out of the water basking, and females must be able to climb out onto land to lay their eggs, so a land area with vegetation in which they can hide and burrow should be provided. As with any outdoor enclosure for turtles, precautions should be taken to prevent them from being eaten or injured by predators such as birds, cats, and dogs.

A large heated aquarium with a swimming area at least as deep as the width of the turtle provides suitable indoor quarters. A rock or shelf where the turtle can get completely out of the water should be provided. This is considered the "haul out" area. Never place an aquarium in direct sunlight, as it could easily overheat.

Salmonella

Many reptiles carry the naturally occurring bacteria Salmonella. Salmonella infection is contracted by ingestion (via the mouth). Good personal hygiene is therefore very important when keeping any animal and regular hand washing is encouraged. Young children and people at high risk of contracting disease because of impaired immune system function are not encouraged to handle or keep these animals. (See Salmonella and Reptiles Advice provided courtesy of BVZS)

Hibernation

Hibernation is optional and where undertaken should be in a damp environment, either in the natural outdoor enclosure or indoors. Turtles maintained in cold and dry conditions desiccate and mostly die. A container filled with water up to a level corresponding twice the carapace width may be used as hibernaculum. Water can be changed every second week although turtles are extremely tolerant to long exposure to hypoxic conditions at low temperatures.

Aquatic turtles commonly hibernate in the substrate on the bottom of waters where oxygen availability is low. Temperatures during hibernation should be between 3-8 °C. Fasting should be initiated by slowly lowering temperatures in the captive environment 2-3 weeks prior to hibernation. As a shorter photoperiod may be of importance to induce dormancy the exposure to light should be decreased in parallel to temperatures.

Turtles can be hibernated for 2-3 months.