



## A Guide to Keeping TURTLES

### TURTLES

The most common turtle kept as a pet is the Red Eared Slider (also referred to as the Red Eared Terrapin), a semi-aquatic reptile that spends most of its time in the water but comes onto dry land for sun basking. They grow to ~20-33cm in size with females being a bit larger, and can reach 70 years of age with good care.

### HOUSING A TURTLE:

#### TANK SIZE:

Turtles grow fast and need sufficient swimming space to stay strong and healthy. A young slider turtle needs a tank at least 3 ft long, large adult turtles need a minimum of 6 ft tank length.



#### HUMIDITY:

Turtles need a warm dry basking area for the shell to dry out properly. Keeping a solid glass or wooden lid on the tank can lead to a build-up of condensation encouraging mould to grow. A mesh wire lid is best as this will also allow UV light into the tank.

#### WATER TEMPERATURE:

Red-eared sliders kept captive indoors should not hibernate. To prevent hibernation in an aquarium, lights should be on for 12–14 hours per day and the water temperature should be maintained between 24–27 °C. Room temperature water is not sufficient and can lead to retarded growth and respiratory ailments as can temperatures above 27°C.

#### WATER QUALITY:

To maintain a healthy slider, water quality needs to be very good. Even with powerful filters, frequent water changes are needed to reduce build-up of waste and toxins.

#### FILTERS:

Turtles enjoy fresh, clean and clear water. A good filter can help accomplish this. Large external filters are best suited to dealing with the large amount of waste production from a turtle. Also, once a week about 25% of the water should be removed and replaced with new water, and the filter cleaned.

#### SUBSTRATE:

Red-eared sliders should not be kept in a tank with gravel or decorations that the turtle can fit in its mouth, as this can lead to bowel impaction and death. Commonly and cheaply available #20-grit sand (pool filter sand) makes an ideal substrate.

#### TANK ACCESSORIES:

Plant life, either fake or real, increases red-eared slider quality of life, mimicking their natural

## Red Eared Sliders can reach 70 years of age with good care.

environment. The real plants can also serve as a source of food.

### **LIGHTING AND SUNBATHING:**

UVB lighting is required for indoor turtles. While an ideal habitat provides real, unfiltered sunlight, UVB lighting is a necessity in habitats without. Glass or plastic between the bulb and the basking area will prohibit sunlight UVB and artificial UVB light from entering the habitat. The bulb should be placed above the turtle's basking area.

UVB heat lamps have not been proven to have the same quality as direct, unfiltered UV rays from the sun. Therefore, it is recommended that turtles be given time outdoors on days with more sun, even if this is only possible in the spring and summer.

Basking platforms or stabilized stacks of rocks should be provided so Red-eared sliders can climb out of the water and dry off completely. The ideal basking surface temperature is 30-35°C.

For the basking area, the best choice is a dirt or sand area, if this is at all possible. Since these turtles like to climb, flat rocks also make well as provide areas for entertainment. The ramp must go deep into the water and water level has to be to the top of the ramp to avoid injuries when turtles dive off the basking area.

### **WHAT TO DO WHEN THE TURTLE OUTGROWS IT'S TANK:**

When they grow larger they can be moved to an outdoor enclosure with the same requirements: water, dry sand, sunlight, shelter, and nutritious food. They have long claws and will climb out of enclosures with rough sides. They love sun and are very active, so they must have plenty of space. You can landscape their home to look attractive and provide for their needs. Remember that they do not stay in water all the time, so must be able to get in and out of their pond easily. If outside, they may hibernate so do not keep trying to feed them if this is the case.

### **FEEDING A TURTLE:**

Red-eared sliders are omnivores and eat a variety of animal and plant materials in the wild including, but not limited to fish, crayfish, carrion, tadpoles, snails, crickets, worms, aquatic insects and numerous aquatic plant species.

The captive diet for pet red-eared sliders should be a varied diet consisting of invertebrates such as worms, aquatic and land plants, and other natural foods. They should never be fed commercial dog food, cat food or fish food. A commercial turtle food can be used but needs to be supplemented with plants like lettuce, carrot tops, peas, dandelion leaves as well as worms, slugs, whitebait etc.

### **TURTLE HEALTH PROBLEMS:**

Most turtle illnesses are either environmental or nutritional. Providing your turtle with a suitable tank, and a balanced, well-rounded diet will prevent most problems. The tank should be large enough, with a good basking area that is easy to access and easy to climb off. The tank needs to be cleaned regularly as described above.

#### **ULCERATIVE SHELL DISEASE**

This occurs especially in captive turtles and is caused by turtles sliding off their basking area into the water quickly and scratching their shell on the tank bottom or shallow rocks. These scratches cause small cracks in the shell that can get infected and slowly spread under the shell throughout the turtle. This disease is preventable with the correct environment.

#### **DYSECDYSIS (ABNORMAL SHEDDING)**

If a turtle is not able to completely dry and completely moisten its skin each day, then it will not be able to shed its skin properly, which can develop into a very painful and debilitating condition.

*Do not dump any unwanted pets into the wild. The SPCA or similar groups can find homes for unwanted turtles. Dumping aquarium animals can spread diseases which affect our native animals.*