



Practice Limited to Birds, Reptiles and Exotics

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Care of Red-Eared Sliders

Natural History

Yellow-eared and Red-eared Sliders (*Trachemys* [*Chrysemys*] *scripta*; *T. s. elegans*.) are found throughout the United States east of the Rockies. It is illegal in the U.S. for pet stores to sell any turtle that is less than four inches (10.6 cm) in length.

Creating the Proper Habitat

All sliders need both a warm, dry area and a large pool of warm water. You will need to provide a warm enclosure with both heated water and a warm place for your turtle to climb out and dry off. The water must be kept clean; rotting bits of food mixed with feces will combine to make an unhealthful habitat and a sick turtle.

Tank

For the smallest turtles, start with at least a 30-50 gallon (113-189 liter) glass aquarium. You can use clean aquarium rock and gravel to build a slope up from the wet end (the pool) to the dry end (the land). Floating or anchored cork rafts or logs are another alternative. Rough rocks must not be used as they can scratch turtle shells; which allows bacterial and fungal infections to get started and penetrate into the turtle's body.

Water

The water must be at least 1.5 to 2 times your turtle's total length (called carapace length, or CL) in depth, with several extra inches of air space between the surface of the water to the top edge of the tank to prevent escapes. The tank length needs to be at least 4-5 times the CL, and the front-to-back width should be at least 2-3 times the CL.

Keep in mind that if your turtle is not yet full grown (hint: if he is not yet as large as a dinner plate, he is not full grown), you not only need to provide room in the tank (water and land) for him the size he is now, you need to provide additional room to allow for future growth.

Water Filter

Proper water filtering systems are necessary to keep the water fairly fresh between your weekly changes. If you have a powerful filter system and you feed your turtle in another tank, you may be able to get away with replacing 25-50% of the water each week for two or three weeks, emptying and cleaning out the tank thoroughly every third or fourth week.

Water Heater

The water temperature must be maintained between 75-86 degrees F (23.8-30 C).

Area Heating

If the room the turtle is being kept in is always over 75 F (23.8 C), then you will only need to heat up a basking area, rather than heating up the room, too. Using an incandescent light or spotlight, allow the area closest to the light to reach 85-88 F (29.4-31 C). Make sure there is absolutely no way for the light to fall into the water or for the turtle to come into direct contact with the light bulb.

Young sliders, and any sick turtle, should be kept warmer (water temperatures between 82-85 F). Sustained low temperatures (between 65-72 F [18.3-22.2 C]) will cause turtles to stop feeding and respiratory infections may result.

(continued on reverse)

Note: Don't guess at the water or air temperatures. Reptile species have very specific temperature ranges during the day and during the night. Use thermometers.

Special Lighting

If you can not regularly bring your turtle outside for natural sunlight, exposure to a ultraviolet B (UVB)-producing fluorescent light, such as a Vita-Lite®, is recommended. UVB exposure is an essential part of the calcium metabolization process and calcium deficiencies are very common in captive turtles.

Electric Shock Hazard

As with tropical fish, there is a danger of electrical shock--to you and to the turtle--when using electric filters, water heaters and lamps in and around the tank of water. All electrical cords should be connected to a ground-fault interrupter that shuts off the current if anything happens. Buy one at your local hardware store. Do not use bulbs with higher wattage than your light fixture is rated for. You must secure your water heater behind an immovable wall or partition to turtle-proof it.

Feeding Your Turtle

To ensure proper nutrition, strong growth and a healthy long-lived turtle, feed a varied diet to both adults and juveniles. Just remember that adults eat less animal protein and more vegetable matter. Juveniles must be fed every day; adults can be fed once every two to three days. Do not feed more than they can eat; the excess food will go to waste and foul the water. Feed a combination of the following foods:

Commercial diets (No more than 25% of total diet)

Trout Chow, commercial floating fish, reptile or turtle food (pellets, sticks or tablets). The pellets and sticks have the advantage of being formulated specifically for reptiles and don't decompose in the water as fast as other foods.

Animal Protein (No more than 25% of total diet)

Live feeder fish--do not feed defrosted frozen fish; they are deficient in thiamin. Earthworms--buy them from a reptile or aquarium store; do not feed the ones from your yard as they may contain bacteria, parasites and pesticides against which your turtle has no immunity. Finely chopped raw lean beef, beef heart and cooked chicken are okay for treats, but are not appropriate as a major part of a balanced diet.

Plant Matter (50% or more of total diet)

Offer leaves of dark leafy greens such as collard, mustard and dandelion greens. Offer shredded carrots (and carrot tops), squash and green beans. Fruit can be offered raw; shred hard fruits like apples and melons, chopping soft fruits such as berries. To help keep their beak in trim, let them gnaw on pieces of cantaloupe with the rind still attached. Check out the edible aquatic plants sold at aquarium stores, too.

Vitamin Supplements should be added twice a week. Use a good reptile or turtle multivitamin. Turtles must also be supplied with additional calcium; they often enjoy taking bites out of calcium blocks and gnawing on cuttlebone, so always have some available to them.

Health

Watch your turtle for any signs of illness: cloudy, closed or swollen eyes; swollen cheeks; open mouth breathing; bubbly mucous around the nose or mouth; runny stools; loss of appetite; listlessness; spots appearing on plastron (bottom shell), carapace or body; soft shell or excessive shedding.

Newly acquired turtles are under a lot of stress and may be riddled with bacterial or parasitic infections that may be passed along to you or your kids. Most turtles carry Salmonellae, which is irregularly passed through their feces into their water, and onto their shells and skin. Read up on proper precautions to take to prevent infection of children and immuno-compromised adults.

We strongly recommend annual health examinations on all exotics!

