

RED-EARED TERRAPINS



Photos by: M Jordan

INTRODUCTION

There are over 126 species of terrapin worldwide. The one commonly kept as a pet is the Red-eared Terrapin (*Trachemys scripta elegans*) from the southern USA. A similar species is the Yellow-bellied Terrapin (*Trachemys scripta scripta*). It is essential to provide them with a lifestyle resembling the natural one as closely as possible, so research the habits of your chosen species in the wild beforehand.

ACQUIRING A TERRAPIN

In captivity, terrapins can have life spans of over 30 years, so you are taking on a long term responsibility. They can be purchased as hatchlings or acquired by re-homing an adult animal. A healthy terrapin should be alert, bright-eyed and clean about the mouth and nostrils. The shell should be hard, without cracks or other damage and the neck and legs free from wounds. It is normal in older animals for the top layer of the shell to peel, as the scutes gradually flake off with growth.

HANDLING

Hold the sides of the shell firmly. Larger animals are very powerful and can inflict painful bites or scratch with their sharp claws, which might cause them to be dropped. This could cause serious injury. Always wash your hands after handling terrapins as they can be carriers of Salmonellosis. Many health problems derive from poor husbandry but by following these guidelines you should achieve success.

For tortoise, terrapin and turtle care and conservation.

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www.britishcheloniagroup.org.uk

INDOOR HOUSING

Terrapins can grow up to 20 centimetres long. Never overcrowd your terrapins as they can be very aggressive towards each other and keep a close watch on your animals if you introduce new ones to the tank.

- A 60 x 30 x 30 cm tank would be suitable for a pair of half-grown terrapins up to 10 cm shell length. Allow 100 square cm of water surface area for each centimetre of shell length to be accommodated: e.g. one 10 cm terrapin = 10 x 100 cm².
- Water depth needs to be about the width of the shell for juveniles but should be no deeper than 5 cm for hatchlings. Adults like deeper water, ideally so they can breathe air while touching the bottom with outstretched legs.
- The water temperature should be 24-26°C during the day and should be lowered by about 5°C at night. Use an aquarium heater with an adjustable thermostat and provide protection from larger animals. It is advisable to include a circuit-breaker for safety.
- Dirty water causes smell and sometimes disease. The installation of a canister filter and pump is essential. The filter will require regular cleaning. Under-gravel filters are not suitable for use with terrapins. Even with a filtration system, the tank will have to be emptied and cleaned regularly. After washing with hot (not boiling) water, clean the glass with a safe disinfectant and always rinse thoroughly before refilling.
- There should be easy access up a slope to a basking area. The simplest is a stack of bricks with a spot-light above. Other methods include fixing a platform to the sides of the tank covering up to a third of the surface area. The terrapins can swim underneath it, but beware of forming places where they could get trapped and drown. Make sure all surfaces are smooth to avoid injury on sharp edges. The basking area should be large enough to allow all the terrapins to bask at the same time.
- In summer a 40 or 60 watt bulb used in conjunction with an ultra-violet lamp will give sufficient warmth, but in winter a 100 watt bulb plus UV lamp is recommended. Whichever lighting you use, it needs to be on for no longer than 12-14 hours per day. Remember that terrapins like to stack on top of each other for basking, so the lighting must be high enough to avoid burns.
- Do not put an airtight cover over the tank since this will prevent ventilation and increase the temperature and humidity.

OUTDOOR HOUSING

Before using an outdoor pool, terrapins must be acclimatised. Start in late winter by gradually decreasing the heating over several weeks until no heat is provided. Keep them in the unheated tank with artificial lighting for at least three weeks before being released into the garden pond in springtime.

- An outdoor pool is ideal for the warm summer months. The terrapins will bask in the sunlight and the natural ultra-violet rays enable them to synthesise vitamin D3 which is essential for the absorption of calcium from their diet.
- Ensure that they have some shaded area to escape from the sun on very hot days, but avoid poisonous plants such as ivy, yew or laurel.
- Make the area escape-proof, as terrapins are excellent climbers. Avoid wire netting – not only will they climb it, they may actually get trapped in it. Outdoor ponds should be provided with adequate protection from the attentions of cats, dogs and birds, especially the heron!
- Construct a slope so that the terrapins can climb out of the pool – logs are ideal. Provide an area of sand as a possible nesting site. In more permanent outdoor set-ups, waterfalls and circulatory pumps can be included.

- Healthy adult terrapins of 750gm can be kept outside and allowed to hibernate during the winter provided that the water does not cool below 4°C. Small, shallow garden ponds do not offer adequate protection from frosts.

FEEDING

- Terrapins in the wild feed on fish, frogs, tadpoles, worms, water snails, shrimps, water insects, various larvae and water plants.
- Hatchlings should be fed daily. As they grow they require feeding less often and as adults only 2 or 3 times a week.
- Terrapins will only feed in water, not on land. To keep the tank clean, feed the terrapins in a separate container such as a plastic bowl, in water of a similar temperature to the main tank. Once they have eaten, leave them there for a further 10 minutes, during which time they often empty their bowels and bladder. This avoids contaminating their tank. Dispose of the water and food debris down a drain or toilet (never a sink) and then clean the feeding container as described for the tank. For reasons of hygiene keep this container exclusively for feeding your terrapins and label it as such.
- Suggested foods are: sprats, whitebait, herring, snails, mussels, cockles, prawns, shrimps, daphnia, earthworms, tubifex worms, bloodworms, and tinned or dried cat/dog food. Always feed fish whole as it is essential that terrapins obtain nourishment from all parts of the fish. Avoid feeding minced meat or chicken alone, as these are deficient in essential minerals and vitamins. Similarly, defrosted fish is vitamin deficient so must not be fed exclusively.
- Plant foods can include: dandelion, watercress, salad leaves, green vegetables, or even fresh fruit.
- Koi or trout pellets make an ideal food as part of a varied diet. When feeding dried cat/dog food, soak the pieces beforehand. You can also add drops of a vitamin supplement suitable for reptiles.
- A cuttlefish bone in the main tank will supply a source of calcium for the terrapins to nibble. Proprietary turtle foods comprising dried river shrimps can be added as a source of roughage.

HIBERNATION

Terrapins can be hibernated, but this is not essential for their general well-being except for breeding. Never hibernate a terrapin which is ill or in poor condition.

- For an indoor aquarium, lower the temperature gradually over several weeks down to 4°C without feeding, as they need to empty their digestive system. The aquarium should be in an unheated room and a check should be kept on the temperature using a max/min thermometer. They can be left to hibernate for 6 to 12 weeks, depending on their age/size and condition. If the temperature does not go below 10°C they will use up their reserves more rapidly and the period of hibernation should be reduced.
- Another method is to place them, once they have reached a low body temperature, into deep plastic boxes full of damp moss (use moss raked from a lawn, not sphagnum moss). Put them into a cold place where the temperature remains at 4°C. Keep the moss moist by spraying it regularly with water to prevent dehydration.
- With both these methods, keep a watch for activity and emergence from hibernation in the spring.
- During hibernation there will be a gradual loss of body weight and it is advisable to weigh the terrapins every week. If there is a sudden weight loss of more than 10% since

hibernation started, bring the terrapins into a warm room and let them warm up for several hours. Avoid sudden changes in temperature. They must then be kept in warm water at 24-26°C in a well-established tank, with a basking area, 12 to 14 hours of artificial lighting and regular feeding.

If they are kept in heated conditions throughout the winter, they will remain active and feed for the whole year without ill-effect. Keeping a terrapin indoors in warm water with a thermostat, a basking lamp and regular feeding will prevent it from hibernating.

Hibernation in outdoor ponds.

When hibernating outdoors, the following points must be observed:

- Do not allow the surface of the pond to freeze over completely for longer than two weeks. It is advisable to use a pond heater.
- Ensure that the pond is at least one metre deep with a good layer of mud for the terrapins to burrow into, and that it has a large surface area.
- Avoid oxygen deficient conditions (stagnant black mud) by ensuring that the surface area is much wider than the depth and removing rotting leaves.

SEXING

Red-eared Terrapin males have elongated tails and long front claws which are used to stimulate the female during courtship. Females have short claws and short tails and adults tend to be larger than males.

COMMON AILMENTS OF TERRAPINS

- Soft shell/lumpy shell: lack of calcium or lack of Vitamin D3 which promotes healthy bone and shell growth.
- Swollen/closed eyes: loss of vision leads to an inability to feed. It can be caused by infection, lack of vitamin A, incorrect feeding or incorrect environmental conditions.
- Injuries to skin or shell from aggressive companions or incorrect set-up.

There are many recognised diseases of terrapins, so if an animal is listless or off its food, seek veterinary advice. You can transport your terrapin safely in a sturdy cardboard or plastic box with strips of crumpled paper around it for protection. Although reptiles rarely show signs of illness with Salmonellosis, good hygiene is essential as they may be carrying the disease.

THE LAW AND TERRAPINS

- You may give minor medical treatment to your own animals, but for their welfare and to remain within the law, consult your vet.
- It is illegal to cause unnecessary suffering to live vertebrates (animals with backbones) by feeding them to other animals. Therefore terrapins should not be fed live fish, frogs, newts, tadpoles etc.
- It is illegal to release non-native animals into the British countryside. This means that unwanted terrapins must not be put into ponds, lakes or rivers where they may compete with the native fauna.

AND FINALLY

If you would like to find out more about terrapins, tortoises and turtles, why not become a member of the BCG yourself? Contact the Membership Secretary at:

The British Chelonia Group, P.O. Box 16216, Tamworth B77 9LA

Or, visit our website at

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