



Handle with care

Terrapins

Species: Red-eared terrapin and European pond terrapin
Scientific names: *Trachemys scripta elegans* and *Emys orbicularis*

Description

Red-eared terrapins usually have a red streak on either side of their head and occasionally a red spot on the top. The upper shell (carapace) in adults tends to be a drab olive with dark lines, streaks and smudges with patches of white, yellow or red. However, there has been a lot of interbreeding with other types of terrapin kept in captivity so colours can vary. The carapace of this species can grow to 21-26cm long.

The adult European pond terrapin is smaller with an adult shell length of 10-13cm. Its upper shell is usually black with yellow spots, specks or short lines; its neck and legs are also covered with yellow markings.

Both species can live for 30 years or more in captivity.

Life in the wild

Red-eared terrapins live in subtropical areas of the east and south-east USA inhabiting still rivers and ponds that are rich in vegetation. The European pond terrapin lives throughout Europe and the Russian Federation in still or slow moving water with good overhanging plant growth. Red-eared terrapins and European pond terrapins have similar diets, feeding on fish, frogs, tadpoles, worms, snails, other aquatic invertebrates and plants. Both species are diurnal (awake during the day) and active during the warmer part of the day.

Source of animals

Red-eared terrapins on sale in the UK now are usually bred in captivity. Their importation in to the European Union was banned in 1997 due to concerns about their impact on native species when released into the wild. The RSPCA, a reputable exotic animal keeping organisation or a local vet may be able to advise where you can find animals that need a good home. European pond terrapins in the pet trade may still be wild-caught and numbers of this species in the wild are declining.

Prior knowledge and preparation

Before acquiring a terrapin, it is crucial that any potential keeper finds out about the animal – including how to provide for the animal's needs when kept in captivity, how big it gets and how long it lives. Only then can the keeper make an informed decision about whether s/he can provide the specialist care and captive environment required, and has the facilities, time, financial means and long-term commitment to maintain a good standard of care. The keeper can then acquire suitable accommodation, food and the necessary accessories, and prepare the enclosure to ensure the captive environment is stable before taking the animal home. This also gives the novice keeper time to locate and to talk to relevant experienced keepers and professionals for further advice such as a vet with experience of treating the species, and specialist UK organisations that keep these species in captivity.

Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Terrapins may need treatment by an experienced vet. The veterinary surgeon can then advise on the costs of consultations and provide information regarding the care and treatment of terrapins. Holiday cover may be difficult to arrange, but your terrapins will need to be looked after properly every day by someone who understands their complex needs.

Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

A healthy terrapin will be alert and bright eyed, with no signs of discharge around its mouth and nostrils. Its shell should be hard, symmetrical without dents, bumps, cracks or other damage and its legs and neck should be free of wounds and sores. Swollen or closed eyes can be due to infections, an incorrect diet or the wrong environment. Terrapins are also vulnerable to shell infections that can be caused by viruses, fungi, bacteria and fractures.

Health issues to find out about

- *Bone disease.*
- *Infections of the shell.*
- *Shell fractures.*
- *Mouth rot.*
- *Swollen eyes.*
- *Respiratory infections.*
- *Internal parasites.*
- *Digestive problems.*

Why are terrapins vulnerable in captivity?

Terrapins are completely dependent on their owners to provide the correct accommodation, heating, humidity, lighting and food, all of which must replicate as closely as possible that found in the animal's wild habitat. Many owners are unprepared for a terrapin's adult size and may try to rehome or abandon the animal at this time.

Without correct care terrapins will suffer from painful and debilitating conditions such as mouth rot, other fungal and bacterial infections and bone disease.

Handling/transporting the animal home

Small terrapins should be picked up by gently holding the sides of the shell; larger ones need to be lifted with fingers beneath the shell and thumbs well placed above. Lift the animal carefully, and take care not to allow it to fall. It should be put down very gently to protect its legs from damage. Large terrapins are strong and may scratch and bite.

Terrapins should be transported in sturdy cardboard boxes, filled with damp crumpled paper. Anyone handling terrapins or cleaning their enclosure should wash their hands before and after handling the animals to reduce the risk of picking up and spreading bacteria such as *Salmonella*.

Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

Terrapins can be kept either singly or in groups, and can live indoors all year round or, once large enough and acclimatised (see more information below), outside during the summer. Terrapins are semi-aquatic so need access to both a dry land area and a pool to allow swimming. Indoors a glass vivarium can be used, however it is important to get one big enough to accommodate a terrapin's future growth. For each centimetre of its shell's length a terrapin will need a vivarium floor space of 100cm². For example, a terrapin with a 10cm shell will need a vivarium with a floor area of 1,000cm².

The vivarium should be kept out of direct sunlight and draughts. It will need a large surface area of water that is also as deep as the largest terrapin is wide. Very young terrapins need a very shallow pool. The water needs to be of a sufficient volume to allow all the terrapins kept in the enclosure to fully submerge (at the same time if they want to) and to turn around and swim. The pool access should be smooth and a slope from the water to the beach area should be provided to allow the animals to get in and out easily. A suitable water filtration and circulation system will need to be fitted to keep the pool clean. A heater will also be needed to maintain the water temperature at 23-26°C during the day and 18-21°C at night. The vivarium will have an area of land that slopes gently into the water and which is made of round pebbles or large grade gravel – one area should be under a basking light with a basking area of 30-35°C, another area should be cooler with some shade. Lights that emit at the UVB spectrum must also be provided over the basking area – terrapins need 12-14 hours of this quality of light each day and they need to be able to get close enough to the UVB light source.

If the terrapins are large enough to be moved outside for the summer, they will need to be acclimatised. From late winter until spring the heating in the inside enclosure should be gradually turned down until there is no heating provided in the indoor tank. Then after a further three weeks in the unheated vivarium, the terrapins can be released outside into the warm spring weather. In an outside pond there should be a shaded area and a flat basking area with a gentle slope leading into the water. An outside summer pond should be protected so that predators such as gulls, herons, foxes, cats and dogs cannot attack the terrapins. Terrapins can climb and burrow so the fence around the outside enclosure should be at least 30cm high and buried into the ground to the same depth to allow the terrapin access to both a land area and a pool. The wire must have no sharp projections. The enclosure must be 'escape-proof', as by law, these non-native terrapins must not be allowed to escape into the wild.

Both animals and plants should be included in the terrapin's diet. Dead whole freshwater fish, snails, cockles, mussels and shrimps are suitable. Fresh vegetables (e.g. spinach, watercress and dandelion leaves) and fruit such as tomatoes are ideal. Proprietary pellets can be used to supplement this varied diet. Additional items such as cuttlefish bone and crushed eggshells, and a vitamin and mineral supplement are also needed to keep terrapins healthy. Adults need to be fed two to three times a week. Young terrapins should be fed every day. Terrapins are messy eaters and will defecate in the pool, so the water filter and vivarium will need to be cleaned and fully rinsed with water at least once a month, with the pool water changed more regularly to keep it clean. Care should be taken to make sure the water is up to the right temperature before returning any terrapins.

THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.

If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.