



# Pond Terrapin/Slider CARE SHEET



Pond terrapins or 'sliders', *Trachemys scripta*, include red-eared sliders, yellow-bellied sliders and Cumberland sliders. The biology of captive terrapins is the same as in the wild, so their care should reflect the wild as much as possible to meet their complex welfare needs. These include: the need for a suitable environment; a healthy diet; to express normal behaviours; to be kept with or apart from others and to be protected from harm. This is a basic guide, so do your own research before getting a terrapin.

## Biology

Pond terrapins are found across the southern states of North America. They are semi-aquatic and bask on land, rocks or floating branches throughout the day. This species is 'diurnal' (active by day). They slide into the water if predators approach, which is why they are also called 'sliders'. In the wild, they have a varied diet of fish, amphibians, rodents, birds, eggs and many different plants.

Terrapins have been reported living around 30 to 40 years in captivity. Female sliders grow much larger than males. Hatchling sliders tend to grow very quickly; small babies will rapidly grow to be as big as a dinner plate. This is an active and inquisitive animal that will require a high level of care.

Before acquiring a terrapin, you must be sure that you are able to provide the correct care and associated costs for the animal's whole life. As *Trachemys scripta* are identified as invasive alien species, their keeping and sale is strictly controlled. It is illegal to sell

*Trachemys scripta* and keepers must keep them securely at all times and not allow them to breed.

## ENVIRONMENT

This species should be housed in large tanks, at least when young. You can house them in secure outdoor ponds with outdoor heating and lighting when adult. In any case, the enclosure must be secure to prevent escape and free from hazards that might cause injuries. Fish tanks are ideal and easy to keep clean. Another option is a specially made terrapin tub. This is a large plastic tub with space for both water and a dry area.

As a minimum, terrapins need enough water to be able to swim without touching the sides or bottom of the tank, or breaking the surface of the water. Larger volumes of water are easier to keep clean. A good sized tank allows 80 litres of water per 5 cm of shell length. Therefore, a terrapin with a 25cm long shell will need 400 litres of water. It is cost effective to obtain an enclosure large enough for the adult at the outset. You can then increase the water level as your terrapin grows.

The tank must be secure to prevent escape and to protect the terrapin from other pets or children. You will need a cover that does not hold in humidity, such as wire mesh, as good ventilation is essential to reduce the risk of health problems.

## Temperature

Reptiles are 'ectothermic' meaning they use their environment to warm up and cool down.

### LIFESPAN

Around 30 years in captivity

### SIZE

Females around 25 cm  
Males around 21 cm

### WATER TEMP.

22-25°C

### BASKING ZONE TEMP.

30-35°C

### UV INDEX

Basking zone: 3.0-5.0  
Gradient to zero in shade

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A core aspect of reptile keeping is maintaining a 'thermogradient'. This involves creating a 'basking zone', where the animal can absorb warmth, whilst leaving another area cool to allow the terrapin to select the level of heat it needs. To create a basking zone, use a reptile heat lamp pointing downwards. The lamp needs to create a zone of heat large enough to warm up the whole body and not just the shell. You will need to provide a dry area under the heat lamp that is big enough to support the animal and a ramp for access to it from the water. Then add another dry platform in a cooler area of the tank. It is also important to give the terrapins privacy. These are secretive animals that need to have lots of cover. They will then feel more comfortable and will come out of hiding over time.

All heat sources must be guarded to prevent injury to the reptile and controlled by a thermostat. Place the probe of a thermostat at the level where the animal can reach. Adjust the thermostat and check the temperature with a digital thermometer until the basking zone reads 30 to 35°C. Thermostats are not always accurate, so you must check the temperatures at least once a day. Use a digital thermometer under the basking zone and another in the cool area. An infrared thermometer can also be used to check the temperature in the basking zone and cool end daily. In a warm household, you can turn off the basking lamp at night to simulate night-time.

For the water, use an aquarium heater with a guard and an inbuilt thermostat, set to about 25°C for hatchlings, decreasing to 22°C for adults. Check this temperature daily using a waterproof thermometer.

The tank should be placed in a safe location away from draughts and sources of heat such as direct sunlight as these can affect the temperature.

## Light

Reptiles use natural daylight to set their day and night patterns. Sunlight contains visible light and ultraviolet (UV). One part of UV is called UVB, which allows reptiles to make vitamin D<sub>3</sub>, vital for them to store and use calcium. Another part is UVA, important to allow reptiles to see their world in full colour.

Create a 'photogradient', from light to shade, by grouping your light with the heat source so the cool end is more shaded, just as in the wild. Fit a 7 to 12% UVB reptile lamp over two thirds of the tank to create a wide area of UV. UVB decreases with distance, so follow the UVB lamp manufacturer's recommendations regarding distance between the lamp and the terrapin's shell. Use the correct length reflector to direct the light downwards.

The UVB output decreases over time so the UVB output should be checked regularly using an appropriate UV Index (UVI) meter positioned at the level of the animal directed towards the UV lamp. Pond terrapins require a gradient of UVB within their enclosure ranging from UVI 3.0-5.0 in the basking zone to zero in the shade. The lamp must also be replaced according to the manufacturer's instructions. UV lamps must always be guarded to prevent burns, or injuries should the bulb shatter. Turn off all lights at night. Lamps can be controlled using a simple plug-in timer; 12 hours on during the day and 12 hours off at night.

## Cleaning and Water Quality

Terrapins need constant access to clean water in which to swim. The water will need powerful filtration that is maintained regularly as sliders produce lots of waste.

A well set up filter allows beneficial bacteria to grow, which break down waste naturally. You need to carry out weekly 20% water changes to dilute the waste products that your filter cannot break down. It is vital that the filter sponge is swished in the tank water, before you throw it away. This clears the filter sponge of solids but keeps the helpful bacteria. For the health of the terrapin and your filter, you will need to add a dechlorinating product when you replace the water.

You will need to ensure that the water is low in wastes called ammonia and nitrite. It is recommended to purchase testing kits for these and check the water quality often. If your tests show that the waste levels are high, you will need to change half of the water every day and keep testing until conditions improve. If the waste does not decrease over time then you probably need a stronger filter. The main cause of poor water quality is over-feeding because uneaten food is left to rot. A UVC steriliser is also a good idea as it will kill off harmful bugs in the water. Be careful as reptiles can carry *Salmonella*. Wash your hands before and after handling the slider or its equipment, to reduce the spread of infection between you and the terrapin and *vice versa*.

## DIET

### Feeding

Terrapins require a varied diet. A quality dried terrapin food should be used alongside thoroughly defrosted freshwater fish. Fish should be completely thawed and at room temperature, otherwise it can make your reptile very ill. Also feed live invertebrate foods including river shrimps, blood worms and locusts.

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Research the different diets available and discuss these with your reptile vet. It is important to provide lots of variety. Feed your slider every two days and only offer as much as it can eat in five minutes. Then use a net to remove uneaten food from the water. Terrapins are opportunistic feeders and will overfeed if allowed to, resulting in obesity or too rapid growth which can cause disease. It is a good idea to weigh them regularly to monitor this.

Terrapins will consume live plants which should be encouraged. Make sure that the plants that you offer are safe, such as pond weed. Sliders should not be kept with live fish because they will kill or chase the fish and cause them stress.

Supplements provide the vitamins and minerals that are not available in captivity. These can be lightly sprinkled onto the food source before feeding. Supplements can be over-provided so always follow the manufacturer's instructions. For example, with a well-set UV system you will not need to provide high dietary vitamin D<sub>3</sub> levels. Speak to your reptile vet about the best supplements to use. You should also provide natural cuttlefish bone pieces for the slider to chomp on as a source of calcium.

## BEHAVIOUR

### Enrichment

Providing opportunities for natural behaviour is known as enrichment. Our understanding of these animals has improved with new research - it has been shown that reptiles can learn simple tasks and they are more complex than people thought in the past. You will have already created areas for basking and swimming but you can also add securely placed rocks in the water for the slider to investigate and hide between. You can also provide enrichment by feeding live river shrimp which the slider can hunt in the water.

You should also add plants such as pond weed in the water, which will increase the dissolved oxygen and can be eaten by the slider. You can also add floating plants



### Bringing your terrapin home

Always set up tank two weeks before introducing your terrapin to ensure the electrics are running correctly. The water will come to temperature and the filter will start to cycle during this time. Place the container onto the basking platform and gently allow the terrapin to come out. Secure the tank and leave lights off until the following day. This will reduce stress and allow the slider to explore. Turn your lights on again the next morning and check on your terrapin.

to make the slider feel more secure and provide shade.

### Substrate

Substrate is the name for the covering on the tank floor. It is recommended in a glass aquarium so that the terrapin cannot shred the sealant. Fine sand can be used but small stones or gravel are to be avoided as they are sometimes eaten, causing a blockage in the digestive tract. Sand substrate should be cleaned regularly when you do your water changes, with the use of a siphon. A thin layer is easier to keep clean as waste stuck in the sand will break down slowly and add toxins into the water. In the dry area you can use an organic soil/sand mix. For permanent housing, we recommend that owners provide a naturalistic environment and also consider a bioactive system. Keepers can research how to do this using expert books on the topic, or specialist keeper member groups online.

## COMPANY

If you want to keep more than one terrapin then you will need to provide a basking spot for each animal and make sure they are all getting enough food. Terrapins can become aggressive to one another, especially if they feel overcrowded as they will fight for resources.

### Handling

Terrapins should not be petted, especially when young as they are quite fragile. However, you can get them used to some handling to make health checks, transport and cleaning easier and less stressful for them. The terrapin can be gently picked up at either side of the shell, so that it cannot reach around and bite you. Always wash hands well before and after handling.

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## HEALTH & WELFARE

### Shedding

Reptiles shed their skin which also applies to terrapins. Shell plates will shed individually and the skin around the legs and neck will shed in pieces. Both should happen easily without intervention. Having the opportunity to come out of the water often is important for shedding; otherwise they can get fungal infections. If your terrapin has sores or is constantly shedding, you should seek the advice of your reptile vet to rule out a shell or skin infection.

### Diseases & concerns

A healthy terrapin has clear, bright eyes and a smooth shell. The skin should be smooth and without blisters, which can be a sign of an infection.

You should register with a suitably qualified reptile vet so that the animal can have access to check-ups and medical treatment as necessary. Sliders can suffer from nutritional diseases, unless they have a varied and well-planned diet and the heating and lighting systems are tested to be working well at all times.

It is important to feed a range of fish, so that the terrapin gets a varied diet and also to avoid a build up of toxins from any one type of fish.



### Transport

If you need to transport your terrapin, for example to the vets, it is important to do so safely. Choose a suitable sized carrier for the size of terrapin. Use a top ventilated container with some paper towels, kept damp. If the transport time is short, use dry towel to prevent them getting too cool. Keep this warm; the addition of a heat pack may be required but make sure this will not over-heat. Keep transport and packaged time to a minimum to reduce stress.

One of the most common and serious issues that affects captive reptiles is vitamin or mineral deficiencies. Metabolic bone disease, 'MBD', describes a range of nutritional diseases and imbalances, typically involving a lack of available calcium due to a deficiency of vitamin D<sub>3</sub>, most often due to a lack of UVB lighting. Symptoms of MBD include swellings around the mouth or eyes, or the shell becoming uneven. Young turtles with MBD can have soft shells, like rubber.

Terrapins are also very susceptible to eye problems. This may be water quality related or due to vitamin A deficiency, which is one of the reasons why a varied diet is so important. Try to include lots of vegetables containing beta carotene, such as sweet potato.

If the terrapin is not eating as normal then this may be a sign of internal parasites. Sliders can also suffer with mouth infection or mouth rot, so look out for changes in the mouth.

Terrapin ownership should not be undertaken on a whim. These are large species that require lots of care and equipment to keep them happy and healthy for life. It is essential that you take time to research the diseases of pond terrapins further. If you do get a terrapin, monitor its health daily and contact your reptile vet urgently if you have ANY of the above concerns.

This care sheet is a basic guide only. Further information must be sought before you decide to take responsibility for any exotic pet. Find more information on our website:

[www.rspca.org.uk/terrapiin](http://www.rspca.org.uk/terrapiin)