



Photo courtesy of Patrick O'Brien

Caring for Red-Eared Sliders (RES) and related North American water turtles prepared by the Rio Grande Turtle and Tortoise Club

Red-eared sliders, *Trachemys scripta elegans*, and other slider species are familiar to baby boomers as the dime store turtles of their childhoods. Millions were raised in commercial hatcheries and sold as pets, but due to improper husbandry few of the delicate hatchlings lived to adulthood. A 1975 federal law prohibiting the sale of turtles less than 4" long put an end to the worst practices. However the law has never been strictly enforced, so hatchlings and the still legal and much hardier larger turtles can still be readily obtained from pet stores, roadside and flea market vendors, and over the internet.

Although this care information is specific to *Trachemys* spp., it can also be applied to similar water turtle species such as painted turtles and cooters (*Chrysemys* spp.). However, it is always best to research the specific requirements of whatever species you are interested in, preferably before you get one.

How Do I Tell If It's a Red-Eared Slider?

Aquatic turtles, i.e., turtles that spend most of their time in the water, are characterized by a flattened, streamlined shell and feet that are webbed for swimming. This is in marked contrast to box turtles and tortoise species, which tend to have a high, domed shell and stumpy, "elphantine" feet better suited for walking around on land.

Red-eared sliders are aptly named; they are characterized by their telltale red "ears," a prominent blotch or stripe of red behind each eye. They also have yellow stripes on their head, neck, and legs. Related species look similar, but lack the red "ear." The hatchlings' shells are a striking green color with varying patterns of yellow and black stripes, which normally darken to a drab brown or black as they mature.



How Big? How Old?

Red-eared sliders quickly grow from those cute, coin-sized hatchlings to as big as 11 1/2" long, with the males (characterized by their long front toenails and long, thick tail) slightly smaller than the females. Some people will severely restrict the amount of food they give to their turtles or keep them in a small tank believing that this will keep them small, but this is not only unhealthy and cruel, but doesn't work. The lifespan of RES is estimated to be 25 to 40 years, with some documented cases of pets exceeding the half-century mark. Owning any kind of turtle is definitely a long-term commitment!

Housing

The rule of thumb when considering an enclosure for any turtle is the bigger, the better. While a 5 gallon aquarium may seem to be more than adequate for a couple of hatchlings, keep in mind that these guys grow *fast*. A 20 gallon “long” tank or the equivalent is recommended for one or two hatchlings, with a minimum tank size of 40 or 50 gallons recommended for an adult. The water depth should be at least 1 1/2 times the length of the turtle’s shell. Multiple turtles will need a proportionately larger space. Glass aquariums, especially the larger sizes, tend to be very expensive; stock tanks, wading pools, plastic pond liners, and other containers that can hold a sufficient amount of water can also be utilized. Decorative accessories such as aquarium gravel and plastic plants are a waste of money as they tend to get dug up and destroyed by turtles, who may also try to eat them with sometimes fatal results. A proper water turtle enclosure should include a water heater, a good filter (power or canister—the bigger the better), a dry area big enough for the turtle(s) to climb out on for basking, areas to hide and rest, and a source of heat and ultraviolet (UVB) light, both for thermoregulation and vitamin D3 synthesis. A combination of florescent bulbs specifically labeled for reptile use for UVB, combined with an incandescent bulb or ceramic heat fixture for warmth, or a mercury vapor bulb which provides both heat and UVB, can be used. Put the lights on a timer to provide a consistent day/night cycle. The temperature in the basking spot directly under the heat source should be around 85-90 degrees F, with the water temperature in the mid to high-70’s.

RES living outdoors year-round should have a pond or tank at least 2 feet deep—big enough so that the water will not freeze solid in the winter, as well as places to bask and hide from predators (which can include your own dog or the neighbor’s cat), and to hibernate. Hibernation does not seem to be necessary for their health as it is with box turtles and some other species—RES can hibernate if the temperatures drop, but will continue to eat and remain active if the weather remains warm or they are brought indoors for the winter. No need to worry about providing lighting or heat, as the sun is the original source of heat and light, and the best one of all. RES do tend to eat, and poop, a lot, so unless you have a really big pond or lake, good filtration is still important.

What Do They Eat?

RES are omnivores, greedily consuming almost any type of plant or animal matter that is available. Hatchlings are almost totally carnivorous and become increasingly herbivorous as they mature. Try to duplicate nature by offering a wide variety of wholesome foods. For protein, try fish, earthworms, insects, snails, and small amounts of cooked chicken. Don’t feed crayfish as they are thought to transmit a type of shell rot. Plant matter should include dark leafy greens such as turnip, mustard, parsley, and dandelion, water plants, finely grated carrot, and small amounts of fruits and vegetables. Although turtles love it, avoid feeding lettuce since it is almost completely devoid of essential nutrients. Commercial turtle foods are fine as long as they are not fed exclusively. A cuttlebone is a good source of calcium and will also help keep the turtles’ beaks trimmed as they take bites out of it.

Where Can I Get a RES?

Because they are inexpensive, many people continue to purchase red-eared sliders in particular on impulse or as novelties, with little thought of the care they require. As a result, there is a large number of juvenile and adult turtles that need good homes. Please consider adopting one of these turtles, either from a rescue organization or its previous owner before purchasing one. If you do buy one, try to get one from a knowledgeable local source that has healthy, legally sized (shell length of at least 4”) turtles.

Red-eared sliders are known to be extremely hardy and adaptive—one of the reasons for these turtles’ continuing popularity as pets. A sufficiently large enclosure, proper temperatures, a source of UVB, a healthy, varied diet, and clean water will go a long way towards keeping your RES happy and healthy for the long haul.

Additional resources: <http://www.anapsid.org/reslider.html>
<http://www.tortoisetrust.org/articles/res.html>
<http://exoticpets.about.com/od/aquaticturtles/tp/resguide.htm>