

FRESHWATER INFO SHEET

TURTLES

Freshwater turtles and terrapins are ancient creatures. Fossils have been found dating back at least 150 million years. Today, over 250 species of freshwater turtles and terrapins occur in the rivers, lakes and wetlands of tropical, sub-tropical and warm temperate regions across the world.

Freshwater turtles and terrapins have been reared as pets for centuries. For much of the 20th century, red-eared terrapins (also known as red-eared sliders) were widely kept in captivity. Unfortunately, this species rapidly changes from cute hatchlings into 40 cm long adults that can be difficult to house and handle. As a result, abandoned red-eared terrapins have established as invasive populations in water systems in many countries. Often red-eared terrapins seriously impact freshwater ecosystems in which they do not belong, and so for these reasons, the sale of this species is banned in many parts of the world and it is no longer recommended as a pet.

There are many small species of freshwater turtles and terrapins that mature at relatively small sizes and are more suitable as pets, since they can be kept in small sized enclosures at home. Among the best freshwater turtle species to keep as pets are the common musk turtle, razorback musk turtle, striped mud turtle and diamondback terrapin.

Images 1 and 2: The common musk turtle, *Sternotherus odoratus*;

Image 3: A female striped mud turtle, *Kinosternon baurii*;

Image 4: A male musk turtle swimming under water;

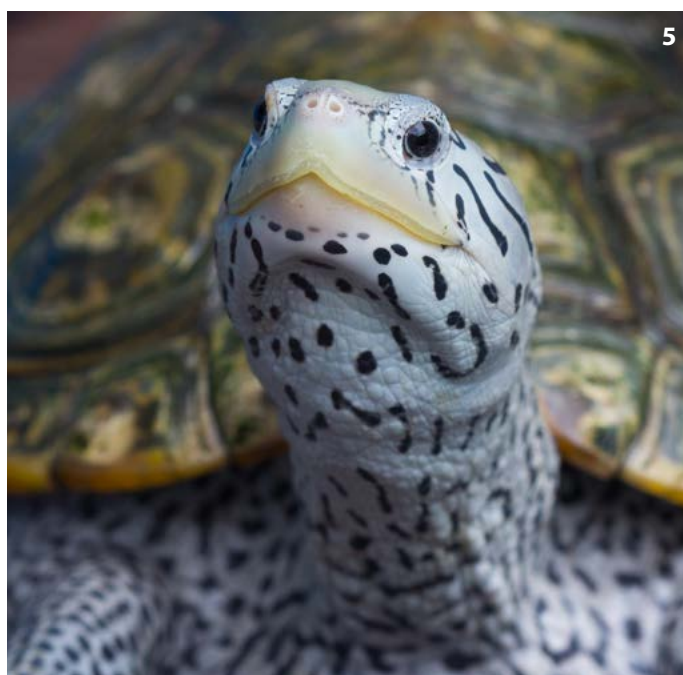
Image 5: A diamondback terrapin, *Malaclemys terrapin*.



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How to keep freshwater turtles

The following is a brief summary and does not include all of the information required to look after these exquisite creatures. If you are interested in keeping freshwater turtles, please refer to the freshwater turtles chapter in the *Weird and Wonderful Pets* book.

Freshwater turtles make fascinating pets, and may live for several decades if properly cared for. For small and medium-sized turtles (e.g. the common musk turtle, razorback musk turtle, striped mud turtle and diamondback terrapin), obtain a turtle tank that is at least at least 90 cm long, 60 cm wide and 80 cm tall. Turtle tanks are essentially glass aquariums with a shelf and open tops to enable easy viewing. You can set up a smaller tank for young turtles, but it may be easiest to start with an adult turtle set up straight away (as described below).

Fill the enclosure with rainwater or treated tap water (with chlorine removed) up to the level of the shelf within. Install a filter to clean the water and provide aeration, and install an aquarium heater with a thermostat so that the water has a constant temperature of 25°C. Turtles can be messy feeders, and due to their protein-rich diet, the tank water will need to be changed every two or three months.

Line the turtle tank with aquarium-grade pebbles, gravel or sand, and install large pieces of sterilised and washed driftwood or branches (available from your local pet shop) so that your turtle can clamber out of the water, when it wishes.

Installing a reptile-grade lamp (emitting UVB and UVA light) is essential. Turtles require exposure to ultraviolet light in order to produce vitamin D, with 12 to 14 hours of exposure needed daily. Also install a heat lamp over one end of the tank (over one of the pieces of driftwood or branches) so that the turtle has a basking area, but ensure that there is an unheated section of the tank where the turtle can retreat to so that it can cool off when required.

Most freshwater turtles are omnivores, and will eat turtle pellets, clumps of frozen bloodworms, feeder earthworms, snails, crickets or mealworms (all available from your local pet store). Many turtles also enjoy occasional leafy vegetables, such as dandelion leaves, spinach or parsley. Avoid iceberg lettuce, which has little nutritional value.

For most freshwater turtle species, multiple turtles can be kept in the same turtle tank.

For more information, see the *Weird and Wonderful Pets* book.

Images 6 and 7: Young common musk turtle, *Sternotherus odoratus*.



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**Buy the *Weird and Wonderful Pets* book
to discover the biology, ecology, diversity
and how to keep freshwater turtles**

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