

Care Sheet

Red-Eared Slider

Trachemys scripta elegans



The red-eared slider (RES) is a basking aquatic turtle, which means it lives primarily in the water but spends part of the day out in the sun, drying off. A red-eared slider needs a large and deep swimming area, a dry area (such as a floating platform), UV (full spectrum) light, heat for basking, filtration for clean water, and a balanced diet. Once housed properly, your red-eared slider will be easy to care for and can live 30 years or more. Turtle keeping is a commitment!



A full-grown female RES can reach 12 inches in shell length. As adults, males are smaller than females.

Water Tank: For every inch of shell length, your aquatic turtle needs 10 gallons of tank capacity. For example, a RES with a 5-inch shell should have a 50-gallon tank. A 40-gallon tank is considered the bare minimum for a small turtle, but because you want to buy as few tanks as possible, know how large your turtle might become before adopting. Turtles can be kept in glass aquariums, plastic tubs, or stock tanks.

When using a floating basking spot, fill your tank no more than three-quarters of the way up with water. Turtles are surprisingly good climbers. If your turtle can reach the rim of the tank when standing on the basking platform, it can escape. A store-bought or DIY tank topper basking spot allows you to fill the tank higher without this risk.

The water temperature should be between 72- and 78-degrees F. If your usual room temperature is lower, use an aquarium heater and monitor the temperature with an in-tank thermometer. If your tap water is chlorinated, treat with a water conditioner specifically for turtles, such as Repti-Safe or AVI Turtle.

Filtration: If you can splurge on an item, this is a good choice. Turtles are messy eaters and poopers, so the better your filter is, the less time you will spend cleaning your tank. For turtles, you should choose a power or canister filter rated for two to three times the amount of water the tank can hold. For example, if you have a 60-gallon tank, even if it is only half filled, look for a filter that can handle at least 120 gallons. Even with a good filter, empty and replace 25% of the water every two weeks. Less powerful filters require more frequent water changes and cleanings.

Basking Spot: Your RES will need to leave the water and dry off. There are a number of inexpensive and well-designed products available (Turtle Dock, Turtle Topper, Turtle Island, etc.), but any a platform strong enough to hold your turtle safely, large enough to be completely out of the water, and with enough traction so the turtle can get up the ramp, will do. Basking turtles spend up to 8 hours a day lying in the sun. A good platform will keep them healthy and happy.

Lighting (very important): Your turtle is a reptile and needs UVA and UVB light to digest food and grow. Outdoors, sunlight provides full-spectrum UV. Note that UV light does not travel well through glass, so any indoor turtle needs lighting, even near a window. Provide a florescent full spectrum UV bulb, either a tube or U-shaped bulb, such as the ReptiSun 10.0. Avoid the compact florescent spiral bulbs as these have been linked to blindness in pet turtles. UV bulbs must be replaced every six months to a year, even if your bulb is still lighting up, per the manufacturer's suggested schedule. The light should be on 12 to 14 hours per day. Your turtle will sleep at night when it is dark.

Your turtle will also need a heat source aimed over the basking platform. An incandescent bulb or spotlight in a clamp-on reflector light can serve this purpose. Be sure there is no way your turtle can touch the bulb and that the light is secure and cannot fall into the water. Use a bulb with enough wattage to heat the basking area to 88 to 95 degrees F. Keep the basking light on at least 8 hours but no more than 14 hours per day.

Diet: Turtles do not need to eat daily, although they will tell you otherwise. Your juvenile (shell length of at least 4 inches) or adult RES only needs to be fed once every two to three days. Feed a good quality pellet food for aquatic turtles like Mazuri Aquatic Turtle Chow, Zoo Med Turtle Sticks, or Reptomin. As an occasional treat, substitute live food such as red wiggler worms, crickets, minnows (not goldfish), or mealworms. Turtles appreciate variety and the hunt. Aquatic turtles must eat in the water.

Your RES will become more herbivorous as it gets older, so veggies should be a part of its diet. Offer green leaf, red leaf, and/or romaine lettuce daily. Other good choices include collard greens, mustard greens, dandelion greens, kale, turnip greens, and, occasionally, spinach. Avoid members of the brassica family, which include cabbage, brussel sprouts, and broccoli.

Offer your turtle a banquet block or calcium block every so often. Turtles always need calcium and chewing on a block keeps their beaks in shape. You can offer your turtle fruits, such as strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, melon, apple, and banana, as a treat once a week.

Helpful Extras: A timer for your lights means your turtle will never miss any daylight or basking time, even if you are sleeping late or are away for a few days.

Instant read thermometers or infrared thermometers are invaluable for measuring the basking area temperature or the water temperature after a tank filling.

Siphon draining kits make tank cleanings easier and quicker.

A fine fish net is helpful for skimming unwanted debris, like uneaten food and poop, from your tank.

This is a basic care sheet and best practices change with research and experience. The internet provides access to experienced turtle keepers. Consider joining an online turtle group. You will find groups on Facebook as well as independent sites like www.turtleforum.com.