

# Red Ear Slider Care and maintenance

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## Red-Eared Slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*)

### Difficulty: Hard

Red-eared sliders are large, semi-aquatic turtles native to the southern and southern central regions of the United States. They prefer aquatic habitats such as ponds, lakes, swamps, and slow-flowing rivers.

Like other turtles, red-eared sliders are diurnal, which means that they are most active during the day. As omnivores, they use much of this time to hunt small animal prey and forage for edible plants.

As one of the largest turtles available in the pet trade, red-eared sliders average 10-12" in shell length, although females are generally larger than males. With good care, they generally live 20-30+ years.

Although red-eared sliders are the most popular type of pet turtle, and they are incredibly hardy and adaptable, they are far from easy to care for. Seriously consider your choice before taking on this species as a pet. There are many unwanted red-eared sliders in the hobby, so if you have decided that this is the pet for you, please strongly consider adoption over buying “new”.

### What You Need for a Bioactive Red-Eared Slider Pond

- Waterland tub, large
- [34" T5 HO Arcadia 6% UVB bulb](#)
- [36" The Bio Dude Solar Grow T5 HO Single Bulb Light Strip](#)
- [Bio Dude Glow & Grow 22" LED](#), x3
- [Exo Terra Sun Glo Halogen Lamp 100 watt](#), x2
- [Exo Terra Reptile Deep Dome Fixture, Large](#), x2
- Plug-in lamp dimmer, x2
- Aquarium heater, rated for 200+ gallons
- Plastic heater cover
- Infrared thermometer
- Digital probe aquarium thermometer
- Light fixture chains (for hanging from ceiling), x10
- Extension cords, as needed
- Canister water filter, rated for at least 400 gallons
- Filter media (if not included with filter)
- Siphon
- Surge protector power strip
- Ground-fault circuit interrupter (GFCI)
- [Terra Fauna Bioactive Kit 36 x 18 x 18/24](#) (x2)
- Live plants (both aquatic and terrestrial)
- décor (aquatic substrate, rocks, [wood](#), toys, etc.)
- Turtle pellets
- [Cuttlebone](#)
- Soft toothbrush

### Enclosure Size

The minimum enclosure size recommended for housing a single red-eared slider depends on the size of the turtle itself. The general rule is to offer **at least 10 gallons of water per inch of shell length**. It's best to buy an enclosure that is large enough for your turtle as an adult, rather than using several different enclosures as your turtle grows, so you will need an enclosure that offers at least 100-120 gallons of water.

Remember that red-eared sliders are primarily aquatic, so this enclosure must be able to hold lots of water without leaking. You can use an aquarium, stock tank, or pond for this purpose, and each will need varying degrees of modification to house a red-eared slider appropriately. One of the simplest solutions is to use a **large Waterland tub**, which is built specifically for housing turtles.

Multiple red-eared sliders can potentially be housed together in the same enclosure, but it isn't a requirement. In fact, cohabitation requires a much larger enclosure, and often leads to bullying between the turtles in one form or another. So it's best to only keep one turtle in your enclosure.

## Lighting & UVB

Red-eared sliders are diurnal, so they require UVB lighting to stay healthy. They are also likely to benefit from a bright ~6500K daylight lamp, which adds extra illumination to the enclosure and encourages better activity, appetite, and mental health. The extra light is also required to help keep your plants healthy and growing!

For UVB, we recommend installing a **Zoo Med T5 HO ReptiSun 5.0** or **Arcadia Forest 6%** in a reflective T5 HO fluorescent fixture, long enough to span the land area plus some of the water area. So for a large Waterland tub, you will want a bulb about 34-36" long. Do not use other brands — when it comes to UVB, *brand matters!*

The UVB lamp should be hung from the ceiling to be 13-14" above the basking spot to achieve a UVI of approximately 3.0-4.0 in the basking area. UVI can be measured with a **Solarmeter 6.5**.

For daylight lighting, we recommend installing **The Bio Dude Glow & Grow LED lamps** or similar, spanning the length of the enclosure. This helps make sure that your plants get enough light to stay healthy!

Both lighting and heating should be on for 12 hours/day.

## Heating

Because red-eared sliders are reptiles, they are cold-blooded, and that means that they need a range of temperatures within their enclosure so they can regulate their own body temperature as needed. Areas of heat (ex: the basking area) speed up their metabolism and promote activities like digestion and healing. Cool areas (ex: the water) slow the metabolism and promote activities like rest and energy conservation.

To promote optimum health and metabolism, your red-eared slider will need the following temperatures within its enclosure:

- Basking surface temperature: 95-104°F
- Basking air temperature: 85-90°F
- Water temperature: 74-76°F

Both land and water heat sources should be turned off at night to create a natural drop in temperature.

## Heating the land:

To heat the basking area, you will need two 90-100w halogen flood heat bulbs and two narrow dome lamp fixtures rated for at least 100w. Hang the fixtures from the ceiling so it is the same distance from the basking area as the UVB lamp. If the bulbs get a little too warm, you can plug the lamps into lamp dimmers and reduce the heat that way. If the bulbs are a little too cool, you will need higher-wattage bulbs.

Keep track of your basking surface temperature is to use a temperature gun like the **Etekcity 774**.

### **Heating the water:**

Although turtles younger than 1 year prefer warmer temperatures and fully-grown turtles can tolerate lower temperatures, 74-76°F is a good starting point for water temperature for an average pet red-eared slider.

Heat the water with an aquarium water heater that is rated for the amount of water in the enclosure, such as the **600w Bulk Reef Supply Titanium Heater System**. Water heaters which don't come with their own protective plastic cover must be installed with one to prevent accidental burns.

Keep track of water temperature with a digital probe aquarium thermometer like the **Zacro LCD Digital Aquarium Thermometer**.

### **Water Maintenance**

Aside from keeping the water at the right temperature, you also need to keep it clean. This involves 1) excellent filtration and 2) regular water changes.

Choose a canister-style filter capable of handling at least 2-3x the amount of water present in the enclosure, because most filters are made for fish, and turtles are MUCH messier than fish. So if you have a large Waterland tub with 200 gallons of water, you will need a filter than can handle at least 400 gallons of water, like the **Fluval FX6 High Performance Aquarium Canister Filter**.

But a great filter alone isn't enough. You also need to replace the 30% of the water once every 1-2 weeks, depending on your enclosure's needs. This helps keep the water clear, and more importantly prevents certain waste products from building up to toxic levels. Use a siphon or water pump to facilitate the process. If you drain the water into a bathtub or sink, don't forget to thoroughly disinfect it afterward!

### **Basking Platform**

Red-eared sliders are only semi-aquatic, not fully aquatic, so they need land as part of their enclosure. They use this area to warm up, dry out, and soak up UVB. One of the reasons a

Waterland tub is recommended in this guide is because it was designed for turtles, and already has a built-in land area for basking and walking around as desired. Layer the “land” portion of the tub with drainage material and bioactive-ready substrate (such as the **Bio Dude Terra Fauna kit**), inlay a large piece of flagstone or stone paver for the basking spot, and add edible live plants and CUC.

It’s best not to use floating turtle basking platforms as your only basking area. Although convenient, they do not allow turtles adequate opportunity to express the natural behavior of walking.

### **Decorating the Enclosure**

Enclosure décor is more than just making your setup look good. It’s also an important part of providing environmental enrichment to your red-eared slider, which enhances your pet’s quality of life by providing opportunities to express natural behaviors. Aside from swimming, walking, and basking, red-eared sliders also like to dig underwater, hide in plants, nibble on underwater plants, and chase fish.

Fine-particle aquatic substrates, pieces of wood, rocks, underwater hideouts, edible live plants, and even (compatible) live fish can be a good way to decorate and enhance your enclosure’s enrichment value. Avoid using gravel or pebbles, as pet turtles are known to occasionally ingest them.

### **Food**

Red-eared sliders are omnivorous, which means that they require a balanced diet of both plant- and animal-based foods. How often they need to eat, and how much of each food type, depends on the turtle’s age:

#### **Red-eared sliders younger than 1 year:**

- 50% protein / 50% vegetables
- protein food daily
- vegetable food daily
- turtle pellets every other day

#### **Red-eared sliders older than 1 year:**

- 25% protein / 75% vegetables
- protein food 1-2x/week
- vegetable food daily
- turtle pellets 2-3x/week

A portion of protein should be as much as your turtle can eat in 5-10 minutes, a portion of vegetables should be the same size as the turtle's shell, and a portion of pellets should be about the same size as your turtle's head.

Variety is the key to balanced nutrition, so here's a quick list of options for your slider's diet:

**Protein foods:** crickets, earthworms, dubia roaches, freeze-dried shrimp/krill, frozen bloodworms, silkworms, snails, guppies, mollies, platies, mosquito fish

**Vegetable foods:** collard greens, dandelion greens + flowers, endive, green leaf lettuce, kale, red leaf lettuce, romaine lettuce, raw grated squash, carrots, green beans, raw grated sweet potato

**Turtle pellets:** Omega One Juvenile Turtle Pellets, Omega One Adult Turtle Sticks, Tetra ReptoMin, Zoo Med Natural Aquatic Turtle Food, Mazuri Aquatic Turtle Diet

Chopped fruit like skinned apple, berries, melon, and papaya can be used as occasional treats.

## Supplements

Turtle pellets cover most of the supplement role in a red-eared slider's diet, but you still need extra calcium. Because calcium powder dissolves in water, use a **cuttlebone** instead.

Cuttlebones provide extra dietary calcium and also help keep your turtle's beak well-trimmed.

Depending on the size of your turtle, it may be best to put the cuttlebone into your turtle's tank whole or to chop it into chunks. However, *don't toss the cuttlebone into your red-eared slider's enclosure without removing the hard plastic backing first!*

Expect to replace your turtle's cuttlebone every 1-2 months.

For a more detailed explanation of red-eared slider care, please read the full [Red-Eared Slider Care Guide](#) at ReptiFiles.com.