

RED-EARED SLIDER CARE GUIDE

Trachemys scripta elegans

Bay Area Bird & Exotics Hospital

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Red-eared sliders are one of the most commonly kept aquatic turtles — and one of the most commonly under-housed. Water quality, temperature, and enclosure size are the three factors that drive the majority of health problems in this species. Get those right and you'll have a healthy, active turtle for 20–30 years.

🔍 VITAL STATISTICS

Stat	Females	Males
Adult body length	10–12 in (25–30 cm)	7–9 in (18–23 cm)
Sexual maturity (age)	3–5 years	2–4 years
Sexual maturity (length)	~5 in (13 cm)	~4 in (10 cm)
Average lifespan	20–30 years (rarely up to 70)	20–30 years (rarely up to 70)

🔍 ENCLOSURE

- Water depth must be at minimum as deep as the turtle is wide — this is the floor, not the target
- The larger the enclosure, the better — these are active swimmers and the minimum size listed below is just that: a minimum

Setting	Recommended Enclosure
Juvenile (indoors)	20–30 gallon tank to start — move quickly to 40+ gallon as they grow
Adult (indoors)	100+ gallon — glass aquarium, Rubbermaid tub, or sturdy pond liner all work
Outdoors	Pond of at least 300 gallons — must be predator-proof; outdoor housing carries predator risk that must be actively managed

- A basking dock is required in all setups — large enough for the slider to choose their preferred temperature zone, not just to fit on
- Indoors: dock under a heat lamp. Outdoors: dock in direct sun access with shade available

🔍 SUBSTRATE

- Bare bottom is the recommended option — it is the easiest to keep clean and carries no ingestion risk
- If substrate is used, rocks or gravel must be too large to fit into the turtle's mouth — find this out before putting them in the tank, not after

- Sand and small gravel cause digestive blockages when ingested — not a matter of if, but when
- Any substrate in use should be removed every 2–4 weeks, scrubbed with a dedicated toothbrush, and disinfected with diluted bleach (1:20 dilution) — rinse thoroughly before returning

FILTRATION & WATER QUALITY

- A quality canister filter providing both mechanical and biological filtration is strongly recommended — Fluval, Eheim, and Magnum are reliable brands
- Size the filter for at least the volume of water in the enclosure — turtles are significantly messier than fish, so filtering capacity matters more than with fish tanks
- If using substrate, add an under-gravel filter in addition to the main water filter

Water Change Type	Frequency
Partial water change (25–50%)	Weekly — with a good quality filter in place
Full water change (100%)	Every 3–4 weeks regardless of filter quality

TEMPERATURE

Zone	Temperature
Water temperature	75–86°F (24–30°C)
Sick turtles / hatchlings	Keep at the higher end of the water range
Basking area	85–90°F (30–32°C)

- Use a quality submersible water heater — or more than one for larger enclosures — and thermometers at both the heater end and the opposite end of the tank
- Consistent water temperature is essential for digestion, immune function, and overall health

LIGHTING

- UVB lighting is required — sliders use it to synthesize Vitamin D3, which is needed to absorb calcium from the diet. Without it, metabolic bone disease follows.
- Recommended brands: ZooMed and Arcadia — both have informative websites and well-documented product lines

Season	Light Cycle
Spring / Summer	12–14 hours of visible and UVB light daily
Fall / Winter	10–12 hours of visible and UVB light daily

DIET & NUTRITION

- Red-eared sliders are omnivores — juveniles lean more toward carnivorous; adults shift toward more plant material
- Learn what your individual turtle normally eats — you will catch appetite changes much sooner this way

Life Stage	Diet Breakdown
Juvenile	Primarily protein — insect prey, small worms, and quality pellets
Adult	25–50% pellets and animal protein; 50–75% plant matter

Protein sources:

- Feeder fish and guppies, earthworms, mealworms, black soldier fly larvae — all acceptable
- High-quality commercial pellets: **ZooMed** or **Mazuri** recommended
- **Do not feed:** goldfish, Tetra ReptiMin, or Wardley's brand pellets — these are frequently associated with dietary problems

Plant material:

- Dark leafy greens: kale, romaine, red and green leaf lettuce, dandelion, watercress, parsley
- Vegetables: sweet potato, shredded carrot, shredded squash
- Aquatic plants: duckweed, water lily, water lettuce, water fern, water hyacinth — excellent additions
- Fruit: occasional treat only

Supplementation:

- Calcium: daily for hatchlings, 3 times per week for adults — a floating cuttlebone is also beneficial for beak health
- Multivitamin: weekly — **Repashy** or **ZooMed** are reliable brands

Life Stage	Feeding Frequency
Hatchlings and juveniles	1–2 times daily
Adults	Every 3 days

🔍 CLEANING & DISINFECTION

- Bare bottom is the best choice for hygiene — waste is visible and easy to remove
- If substrate is present, remove and clean it every 2–4 weeks using diluted bleach (1:20) and a dedicated brush — rinse thoroughly
- Perform partial water changes weekly and full water changes every 3–4 weeks
- Red-eared sliders carry *Salmonella* — always wash hands after handling your turtle or touching enclosure equipment, and clean the tank away from food preparation areas

Most reptiles, including red-eared sliders, carry *Salmonella* bacteria without appearing ill. Always wash hands thoroughly after handling and keep tank cleaning away from food prep areas. Red-eared sliders are not recommended for households with very young children or immunocompromised individuals.

Questions? We've heard weirder ones. Call us.

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