

Captive care of

Common Musk Turtles

(*Sternotherus odoratus*)

Also known as: "Musk Terrapins", "Stinkpot turtle", *Sternotherus odouratus*

Suitability as an exotic pet: Common Musk Turtles are by far one of the most suitable turtle species to keep in the home. They are a hardy, robust species, with bags of character and a curious nature, and their small size makes them easier to accommodate than most other turtle species.

Like many turtles, they are a long term commitment, and may live in excess of 40 years.

Native habitat: Ponds and slow moving rivers in North America.

Adult Size: 4 to 6 inches (Shell length)

Enclosure size: 40+ Gallon (160 litres)

Water Temperature: 24-29C (75-84°F)

Basking Temperature: 32C (90°F)

Introduction

The Common Musk Turtle (*Sternotherus odoratus*) is a small turtle species, only reaching 4-6 inches in shell length when adult. They inhabit slow moving and still waters across North America, where they feed on small invertebrates, fish, and a small amount aquatic plant matter. Their common name, and nickname "Stinkpot turtle", derive from their ability to secrete an unpleasant smelling substance (sometimes described as smelling like burnt food) when attacked, to deter predators. This rarely happens in captivity, unless they are roughly handled, and is not a hygiene concern. Being small turtles, they produce less waste than Sliders, Cooters and other large species, and are much easier to keep clean.

Natural behaviours

Common Musks are known as "bottom walkers"; their body is more heavily built and less streamlined than the strong-swimming Sliders, and they spend most of their time on riverbeds and pond floors, foraging for food. They have small fleshy barbels on the chin and throat, which are thought to act as sensory organs to help them find food.

They are very capable swimmers when they need to be, and have highly webbed feet like other aquatic species.

Common Musk turtles do bask, although not as frequently or as confidently as other North American species. They are active climbers, and wild individuals can be spotted climbing up the steep sides of flooded trees to bask.



Housing in captivity

There are multiple methods of providing both swimming space, and a basking platform to Common Musk turtles in captivity. The most popular perhaps, is the use of an aquarium, with a protruding ledge, rock or log, over which a spotlight can be suspended to mimic the warming rays of the sun.

Common Musks are much easier to house in captivity due to their small size, and small waste production, although a reasonably large aquarium or other enclosure is still required. This is not only to provide a good amount of swimming space, but also to dilute the waste which the turtles produce. The recommended amount of water for aquatic turtles is 10 US Gallons (40 litres) of water for every inch of turtle, so a single adult will require a 40 gallon (160 litre) aquarium or other enclosure.

Being "bottom walking" turtles, many keepers provide a shallow amount of water so that the turtle can easily reach the surface to breathe. If deeper water is used, plenty of resting places, such as plants and submerged driftwood should be provided, so that the turtle can sit within reach of the surface, and prevent exhaustion.

Basking areas can be provided using a whole range of methods, but it must be an area where the turtle can climb completely out of the water and dry off. This is vital to prevent respiratory and fungal infections. Natural looking basking areas can be made from corkbark or driftwood. Stacking rocks or other heavy decorations is not advisable unless they

are fixed together with silicone. Turtles hunt for insects and invertebrates under rocks in nature, and are very capable of dislodging even large rocks, which can trap them underwater.

Commercially available basking areas can be used, which can be attached to the glass of an aquarium by suction cups.

Above the basking area, a desk lamp or household spotlight can be fixed to warm the basking area to 32°C (90°F), which should be measured using a thermometer. The basking area must be warmer than the water temperature, otherwise the turtle may not bask.

Many keepers recommend the use of a specialist reptile light, which emits 5% or more UVB. In the wild, many reptiles use UVB (ultraviolet-B) from sunlight to create their own VitaminD3, which they need to absorb calcium. Young Musk turtles in particular will benefit from the addition of a UVB lamp, although it is possible to just use the household spotlight and provide VitaminD3 in the diet.

The water should be kept between 24-29°C (75-84°F), which can be achieved using a submersible aquarium heater available for tropical fish. An aquarium filter should also be used to help keep the water clean and provide a slight current to prevent the water becoming stagnant. It is recommended to choose a filter which is rated for a tank twice as big as your turtle enclosure, as turtles are messier than tropical fish which the filters are designed for. It is important to reduce the flow of the filter as Musk turtles prefer slow moving water. This can be achieved using a spray bar, or positioning the filter so that the output faces the side of the enclosure.

Captive diet

Common Musks are mainly carnivorous in the wild, eating only a minor amount of plant matter. Youngsters tend to eat more animal protein, such as water invertebrates, fish and molluscs, and eat slightly more vegetation as they age. In captivity, the use of a commercially developed pellet, such as Reptomin, is recommended, to ensure that the turtle receives adequate vitamins and minerals. This should then be supplemented with other types of food for variety and enrichment.

For animal protein, frozen bloodworm, shrimp, and krill are similar to natural diet and easily obtained from aquatic shops. Earthworms, crickets, and water snails can be offered.

To supplement plant matter in the diet, live duckweed, *anarcharis*, *elodea* and frogbit can be grown in the enclosure with the turtles.

Cuttlefish bone (with hard backing removed) can be floated in the tank as a source of calcium, which the turtles will bite from time to time.

If you require any further information regarding this caresheet, or Common Musk turtles, you can email the author at: info@insectivore.co.uk



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