



CARE SHEET

Diamondback Terrapin *Malaclemmys terrapin*



The Diamondback Terrapin is a medium sized turtle native to river estuaries and saltwater marshes in North America. Seven subspecies are currently known – Northern (*m.t. terrapin*), Carolinian (*m.t. centrata*), Florida East Coast (*m.t. tequesta*), Mangrove (*m.t. rhizophorarum*) Ornate (*m.t. macropilata*) Mississippi (*m.t. pileata*), and Texas (*m.t. littoralis*). I will not go into the full differences between each subspecies here, suffice to say that there is a variation in colour and size per subspecies. There is an overlap in the natural range, and lots of Northern Diamondbacks are actually hybrids with other subspecies.

Generally the diamondback terrapin has a white to grey/blue skin with black spots and a carapace that can range from black to a pale golden brown. Concentric diamondback terrapins are not a subspecies in their own right, they are individuals from a subspecies that display particularly ornate circular patterns on their carapacial scutes. In the pet trade Concentric diamondbacks are more sought after for aesthetic reasons and thus more valuable, this is equally true of the black Velvet Morphs and the extremely rare Albinos. The males grow to around 5 inches, whereas females can reach 9 inches.

Housing

Malaclemmys terrapin are an aquatic species of turtle and very strong swimmers pretty much straight from birth. In a captive habitat they should be provided with water at least four times the depth that they are long and with a floor plan 4 x their length x 2 length. An adult therefore, could easily need water 48 x 18 x 18 inches as a minimum.

A basking area is required so that the animals can rest and dry off completely. They also use this area to regulate their temperature and UV light absorption. A basking area can be a floating item like bark, or a commercially purchased turtle ramp, equally it can be fixed such as a log or rocks. I prefer to build an above tank basking area which is fixed with a ramp. This prevents movement or sinking and means I can regulate the basking spot in terms of lighting and heat.

Real or fake plants should be provided to allow the animals to exhibit natural hiding or resting behaviour. Note they can try to eat the plants, so plastic plants should be sturdy.

Many keepers like to provide a substrate on the bottom of the tank. Substrate is not required and a tank without it will stay cleaner more easily. Gravel SHOULD NOT be used as the turtles often swallow it in search of food and are unable to pass it, resulting in gut impaction which can be fatal. I recommend play sand marketed for children's sand pits. This will allow natural foraging behaviour and purchase on the bottom of the tank. Make sure it is very well rinsed beforehand to remove all dust and fine particles.

Fresh or Brackish?

Unique to diamondback terrapins is their habitat of salty marshes and river estuaries. These areas have brackish water which is saltier the closer to the ocean you get. I have even observed these animals swimming in the sea in the wild. If captive bred animals are raised in fresh water, there is no need to provide brackish water as long as the water is kept extremely clean. If bacteria is allowed to build up diamondbacks can be prone to skin fungus or shell rot in fresh water, in this instance brackish water can help to improve the condition as the bacteria is killed by the salt in the water. The correct salinity is 1.014 and can be measured using a Full Range Specific Gravity Meter.



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Heat and light

Water temperature for young animals should be in the range of 25-27°C. This can be reduced to 20-22°C for adults.

UVB and UVA (heat) are both required to maintain correct internal temperatures and synthesis of vitamin D3 and calcium. UVB can be achieved using screw in bulb type UVB lamps or the longer T8 tubes. A UVB of 5% (5.0) – to 10% (10.0) should be provide. Replace UVB bulbs at least every 12 months. A ceramic heat emitter or normal basking bulb can provide UVA and heat. Wattage depends on distance from basking area. The basking area should be 35-40°C under the heat lamp. Avoid coloured bulbs and use only those closest to the natural spectrum. The lights should be set to a timer to provide 10-12 hours of light per day during natural hours.



Filtration

Turtles are dirty animals and leave a lot of waste by leftover food and faecal matter. They need filtration 3 x more powerful than what is recommended for fish in the same volume water. All commercially purchased filters will have a rating based on fish, so make sure you bear this in mind. Young *malaclemmys* lack the strength to swim in a strong current, so a weaker flow should be used at this age. Adults will need a decent sized external canister filter.

Diet

Malaclemmys terrapin are a mainly carnivorous species and eat molluscs, crustaceans and fish in the wild. In captivity their main part of their diet will consist of commercially available pellets, mussels, shell on prawns and other sea food. This should be supplemented with red and green lettuce (not spinach or iceberg) but are unlikely to each much. They also enjoy bloodworms when small. Variation is key and a piece of cuttlebone should be provided at all times for calcium and to keep the beak trim.

This guide is meant to be a quick reference/starter guide and does not replace more in-depth research on this species. Always ensure that you know the correct care needs for your animal.

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