

Turtles That Could Live Outside In A Pond

Introduction

The last article covered the design and build of a pond for turtles, that pond was designed principally for the smaller bottom hugging animals such as hatchlings, Musk and Spotted turtles. The nature of any pond should take into account the animal it is intended to house. If the bigger animals are to be kept then the depth should be in the order of 0.5 metres. This month we shall look at what turtles species are available in the UK.

You will conclude that only a few species are really suitable for aquarium keeping for the duration of their life. All of these animals will live at least 30 years, many will live twice that so choosing to keep turtles is a lifetime commitment.

Identification of the commonest animals seen in shops is not easy as the shop invariably has the wrong label on the vivarium. To make matters worse the young animals we see all look similar and change dramatically as they grow.

I will try and make some small sense of it all.

Of help would be a good start-up book;-

“Captive Care of North American Water Turtles” by Richard Lunsford can be downloaded as a PDF file and costs nothing. Remember though that this book is aimed at the American keeper whilst this article is aimed at the keeper in the United Kingdom so husbandry tips will be different.

<http://www.lulu.com/product/paperback/captive-care-of-north-american-water-turtles/1646678>

I have not mentioned anything about breeding as I believe that there are so many of these animals in the UK that any breeding would be irresponsible. The following reputable sites and organisations always have animals that need re-homing.

Tortoise Trust Forum

<http://www.tortoisetrustforum.org/viewforum.php?f=13&sid=d8e4183a0bcc078072c2de644900c915>

The Reptile Forum UK (RFUK)

<http://www.reptileforums.co.uk/forums/shelled-turtles-tortoise/>

Terrapin-Info Forum

<http://www.terrapi-info.co.uk/forum/index.php>

A few words on the groups of animals first then we can look at individual animals later.

1) Mud and Musk Turtles

These are a group of generally small animals found in the more southern parts of the States. All are cute, however most would struggle in the UK weather. The Stinkpot (*Sternotherus odoratus*) has a range into Canada is very hardy and is a great candidate for the UK.

2) The Map Turtles

There are many species of the Map Turtle (*Graptemys*) most have southern ranges and would be unsuitable for a UK pond. However the three commonly imported species can do well.

3) The Baskers

The next two groups have many similarities and are classed as the Baskers. Years ago they were in the same Genus, recently they have been split into two groups something to be aware of when reading older books. These are mostly all southern animals and are generally less suitable for the UK pond. However they are bred in their millions and are the most readily available turtle here in the UK. All get very big.

The Sliders

Two species are commonly encountered the Yellow Belly or Pond Slider (*Trachemys scripta scripta*) and the Red Eared Slider (RES) (*Trachemys scripta elegans*). The RES has been prohibited from importation into Europe, however there were so many imported in the 90s that many are still surviving and available as re-home candidates.

The Cooters

The Cooters (*Pseudemys*) range over the more southerly parts of the USA and only the River Cooter (*Pseudemys concinna concinna*) and the Cooter (*Pseudemys concinna floridana*) are really suitable for the UK climate. There are two Red Belly Cooters one from the north east (*P. rubriventris*) and one from Florida (*P. nelsoni*). Cooters are often misnamed as Yellow Bellies.

4) Rarer Animals

There are a number of other animals that would be suitable but they are virtually impossible to obtain. They include the lovely Painted Turtles (*Chrysemys picta*) and the very charismatic Spotted Turtles (*Clemmys guttata*). Painted Turtles are banned from importation and Spotted Turtles are rarely imported, but both would be very suitable for UK captive pond care.

5) Not recommended

Also imported into the UK are American Softshell Turtles (*Apalone*), Chinese Softshell Turtles (*Pelodiscus*) and Snapping Turtles (*Chelydra* and *Macrochelys*) The American species are very hardy and will survive outside in the UK. The Chinese Softshell can be hibernated as adult. These animals however get very big and dangerous and are in the domain of the very specialised keeper.

6) European animals

Europe has three species of freshwater pond turtle. The most suitable is the European Pond Turtle (*Emys orbicularis*). This species is difficult but not impossible to obtain. It has some 13 subspecies and as with the Baskers and Maps is a group where taxonomists are having fun.

•Musk Turtles



Common Name

Musk or Stinkpot

Latin Name

Sternotherus odoratus

Description and size

This is a full grown female. Stripes on the head define it as a Stinkpot. Males have much thicker tails than the females and are smaller.

Habitat and geography

Found east of the Rockies to the Atlantic coast, including parts of southern Canada.

This is a small bottom walking animal but is a good swimmer. It prefers shallower ponds with lots of vegetation.

Food

Mostly they are carnivorous and will catch bugs and creatures in the pond. They will eat pond plants. Supplement with a standard base food.

Care and Husbandry

Very hardy. Mine have survived outside for years.

Observations

The smallest of the turtles available and would need only a small pond - say 1 metre sq.

The draw back with these is that they can be very secretive but if the pond is smallish and clear then they make great pets.

Occasionally Razor Back Musk turtles (*S. carinatus*) are seen for sale. These come from Southern Texas and are probably unsuitable for an outside pond.

•Map Turtles



Common Name

False Map Turtle

Latin Name

Graptemys pseudogeographica pseudogeographica



Common Name

Mississippi Map Turtle

Latin Name

Graptemys pseudogeographica khonii



Common Name

Ouachita Map Turtle

Latin Name

Graptemys ouachitensis

Description and size

The females get to be about 25cm with the males being about half the size.

G pseudogeographica pseudogeographica has the darker eye and bisecting bar and G pseudogeographica khonii has the the white eye with no bisecting bar ; khonii has the crescent mark going under the eye whilst the pseudogeographica has the hockey stick mark.

G. ouachitensis has the two bold face marks as seen in the picture.

This group is so confusing I have produced this table

Common Name	Latin name	Comment
Graptemys barbouri	Barbours Map turtle	Rarely seen - unsuitable
G. caglei	Cagles Map Turtle	Rarely seen - unsuitable
G. flavimaculata	Yellow-blotched Map Turtle	Rarely seen - unsuitable
G. geographica	Northern Map Turtle	Rarely seen - suitable
G. nigrinoda	Black-knobbed Map Turtle	Rarely seen - unsuitable
G. ouachitensis	Ouachita Map Turtle	Imported, often seen – suitable
G. p. pseudogeographica	False Map Turtle	Imported, often seen – suitable
G. p. khonii	Mississippi Map Turtle	Imported, often seen - suitable
G. versa	Texas Map Turtle	Rarely seen - unsuitable

Habitat and geography

The Maps that we will find in the shops can be found from east of the Rockies through the Mississippi waters and surrounding basin.

Food

These animals are omnivorous. Supplement with a standard base food. Snails are particularly liked.

Care and Husbandry

Maps are good deep water swimmers and seem less susceptible to the spring cold just after hibernation. They are a good beginners animal. They love to sunbathe and must be provided good midday sun.

Observations

The animals regularly imported into the UK are those described in detail above and all are suitable for an outside pond in the UK.

Males are suitable for the smallest ponds however they are also shy.

BASKERS

•Sliders



Common Name

Yellow Belly or Pond Slider Slider and Red Eared Slider (RES)

Latin Name

Trachemys scripta scripta and Trachemys scripta elegans.

Description and size

The animal on the left is the Yellow Belly (“S” cheek mark) and the one on the right is the RES. Occasionally a third subspecies T. scripta troostii is seen which has the red eared area replaced with a more orange palette.

They grow very big, the heaviest I have seen in the UK was over 2Kg and as big as a dinner plate.

“Liberace” I have had for years now and is a clear intergrade between the two species. The characteristic Yellow



Belly “S” cheek mark is clear as is the Red Ear.

The animal, a male has very long front claws which he uses to display to the female in preparation for mating. The males are smaller than the females. This is common to all Baskers.

•Cooters



Common Name

River Cooter

Latin Name

Pseudemys concinna concinna

Description and size

This is a half grown female. River Cooters have a C shaped mark on the second lateral lamina and pattern on the carapace.



Male Cooters have much thicker tails than the females and longer front claws.

Common Name

Cooter

Latin Name

Pseudemys concinna floridana

Description and size

Size same as River Cooter. Note more intense colour on neck and fewer stripes. They have no marks on the plastron. Female.

These Cooters have been recently reclassified and no doubt further changes will yet come.



Common Name

Florida Red Belly Cooter

Latin Name

Pseudemys nelsoni

Description and size

Note the notch in beak and head patterns as distinguishing factors.



Common Name

Peninsular Cooter

Latin Name

Pseudemys penninsularis

Description and size

This animal which I caught in Florida was not full size. Expect all Cooters to get about this big and have no illusion about keeping them in anything but a big pond. This little girl would make more mess than a big Koi.

Sometimes Red Bellied Cooters are seen (*P. rubriventris* and *nelsoni*), these can be identified by a V shaped notch in the beak.

Habitat and geography

Sliders and Cooters live in the southern states of USA but I have seen the RES from British Columbia to Maine. They are now the most widespread turtle in the world with introductions virtually everywhere. In Europe where they have escaped or have been released they have become a threat to the local *Emys* populations. In the UK they are found in many ponds and are often up for re-homing. They have been given an undeserved reputation for attacking our UK fauna by misinformed "specialists". In natural surroundings they are gentle giants.

Food

The Sliders and Cooters are mostly vegetarian. They will take easy meat protein such as dead or dying fish but mostly they go for plants and the insects that live in them. They should be fed a staple diet.

Care and Husbandry

The Baskers love the sun, indeed without it they succumb to the British spring. Whilst the Baskers are less robust than some of the other animals noted above they will survive outside if given a little more TLC. In particular they seem to need help in getting to the surface in the cold spring weather and a ramp from the bottom of the pond should be provided. They also need somewhere to wedge in at the bottom of the pond for the winter period.

Observations

These animals have an inbuilt curiosity and soon get to know the routine and the feeder. In particular the Cooters become silly tame and mine climb out of the pond and search the feeding bowl. Their adult size may intimidate some of the smaller turtles, however in a big pond this is never an issue.

In my pond I have many Baskers and goldfish. The fish are just too quick to be caught.



•European Pond Turtle

Common Name

European Pond Turtle

Latin Name

Emys orbicularis

Description and size

This is a full grown female at about 15cms.

Marking and size is very variable amongst this species. Males have much thicker tails than the females. As with the Maps and the Baskers the Taxonomists are continuously reviewing sub-species allocations.

Habitat and geography

These animals can be found over most of Europe and Northern Africa. Fossil records show that they used to inhabit the UK before the last ice age. Those from the colder climes such as Poland are significantly bigger animals. These animals tend to live in shallower waters and are not great swimmers and as for the Baskers they need to be able to crawl out of their hibernation hole and onto a sunny bank.

Emys are quite cold tolerant, mine were mating just after hibernation in water temps of 8*c.

Food

These animals are mostly carnivorous eating anything they can catch. Food should have a high protein content and be supplemented with a standard base food.

Care and Husbandry

These animals are really the most suited to the UK pond keeper. They don't get too big, they are bright and a joy to keep.

Observations

Emys have a measure of legal protection and require paperwork as for European tortoises. They are not bred in

great numbers but are sometimes available to the pet trade. They are worth the effort to obtain.

Diet

I mentioned a staple diet in many of the sections above. For all the American animals I feed standard low protein (40%) fish pellets. Its always a fight with the goldfish as to who gets there first so I throw pellets onto the lily leaves also. For the bigger animals I soak standard dog biscuits for a couple of hours and feed them by hand. High protein food is not good for them.

I also throw in greenery such as courser lettuce leaves, turnip tops, rocket, etc. Water cress is loved as is duck weed. They will eat your water lilies although mine seem to keep away from the reds but like the whites! As a treat and to supplement their vitamin needs I offer slivers of salmon or trout, shrimp with shell and mussel. Do not feed other kinds of fish as it may lead to thiaminase poisoning.

Despite having to carry their home on their back all of these animals are brilliant climbers! A four foot chain link fence is not a barrier. Ensure that your pond enclosure is escape proof or you will loose your animals.

As a generality most of the animals covered can be kept outside in a pond provided the pond is suitable and the animal is healthy – but that is the subject of another article.

I must extend my thanks to Jo Jeynes and Paul Eversfield for their help in my struggle to get sensible descriptions to go with the pictures. I have used several books for this article many of which were contradictory or inconsistent. The base reference was “Turtles of the United States and Canada” second edition.

Links

Best site for UV data

<http://www.uvguide.co.uk/>