



Diamondback Terrapins

Malaclemys terrapin

INTERMEDIATE • 5–9 IN ADULT • 25–40 YR LIFESPAN • BRACKISH ONLY • US EAST COAST

North America's only salt-marsh turtle, and the only one you'll keep in brackish water. Diamondback terrapins are small, alert estuary specialists, and that one fact drives everything else: freshwater keeping causes long-term shell and skin problems. Check your state law first. Terrapins are protected across much of their range, and in many states keeping one is restricted or illegal.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Intermediate
Water temp	75–80 °F
Basking spot	85–92 °F
Salinity	1.010–1.020 SG
UVB	High output, required
Diet	Fish, shrimp, snails, crabs
Feeding	Every 1–2 days
Adult size	5–9 in, females largest
Lifespan	25–40 years



Diamondback terrapins are named for the concentric rings on their scutes. They appear at NARBC tables as captive-bred specialist stock.
Photo: Simon Tonge / iNaturalist · CC0

01

Check the Law, Then the Tank

The law comes first here. Terrapins are protected in many states, and possession may require a permit or be barred outright; confirm your state's rules before you buy, not after, and buy captive-bred from a documented source. The husbandry side is just as blunt: nobody keeps a terrapin for the handling. They're alert, quick and food-motivated, and an adult's beak crushes snails and crabs. Handle for health checks and moves, and that's it.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Terrapins swim, so footprint and water volume matter more than height. Hatchlings start at 24×12×12 and adults need 72×24×24 at minimum; most serious keepers end up building a custom brackish tank or an outdoor setup. Every stage is horizontal, and racks are never appropriate. Plan for the females, which reach 7–9 inches against the males' 4–5. Cohabitation goes wrong here: terrapins nip tails and toes, and a larger animal will bully a smaller one off the basking dock.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	24×12×12	36×18×18	Brackish from day one; pure freshwater causes shell problems long-term.
Juvenile	36×18×18	48×24×18	Brackish water held at 1.010–1.020 specific gravity.
Subadult	48×24×18	72×24×24	Females pull well ahead of males here; plan the tank for the larger sex.
Adult	72×24×24	Custom brackish pen	Females 7–9 in, males 4–5 in. Protected in many states; verify legality.

Habitat-OS life-stage guidance. Dimensions in inches; the preferred adult setup is a build, not a shelf product.

03

Heat, Basking, and UVB

Hold the water at 75–80 °F with a guarded submersible heater. The room can drop to 68–74 °F overnight; the water should not. Above the water, a dry dock under a basking lamp reads 85–92 °F. Terrapins bask hard and they bask dry, so the dock has to let them get completely out of the water; a permanently wet plastron invites shell rot. High-output UVB is required, not optional, and the tube runs the length of the basking area with no glass or mesh in the way.

04

Brackish Water and Filtration

Salt is what makes this turtle different. **Terrapins need brackish water, not fresh.** Hold 1.010–1.020 specific gravity with marine aquarium salt and verify it with a hydrometer; table salt won't do. Mix it in a bucket before it goes in the tank, never in the tank itself. Over-filter, because a carnivore's leftovers foul water fast, and keep to a real water-change schedule. Top off evaporation with dechlorinated fresh water, not salt water; the salt stays behind.

05

Substrate & Furnishing

Go bare-bottom or use river rock too big to swallow. Skip loose sand and fine gravel, especially with juveniles: swallowed grit impacts turtles, and it kills. The furniture that matters is the dry dock, sized so the whole animal fits with room to turn, plus rock and driftwood to break sightlines. Most freshwater plants die at these salinities, so use hardy brackish species or artificial ones. Give a swimming lane; a terrapin that can't move gets fat and bored, and both show up later.

06

Feeding

Terrapins are carnivores: fish, shrimp, snails, and crabs, offered every 1–2 days. Hard-shelled food is the point, not a garnish. Snails and crabs keep the crushing jaws working and carry their own calcium; leave a cuttlebone floating between meals. Quality pellets made for aquatic turtles fill the gaps. Offer meals in a separate tub of tank water if you can; it spares the filter. Feed less than feels right. An overfed terrapin grows too fast, and fast growth shows up in the shell.

07

Health Red Flags

The shell and the eyes tell you first. Soft spots, pits, white or gray patches, or a bad smell mean shell rot, and it moves inward faster than it looks. Swollen or crusted-shut eyes point at water quality or a vitamin A shortfall. Then watch the swim: a terrapin listing to one side, floating tail-high, or breathing with an open mouth is telling you about its lungs. Any of these is a reptile-vet appointment, not a water change and hope.

Husbandry data: Habitat-OS species library. Structure follows the NARBC show handout series. Every animal is an individual - when in doubt, ask the breeder at the table or a reptile veterinarian.