



Map Turtles

Graptemys spp. (G. pseudogeographica kohnii)

INTERMEDIATE • 3.5–10 IN • 20–30 YR • DIURNAL BASKER • CENTRAL UNITED STATES

Watch a river log on a summer afternoon and the map turtles are already gone: they hit the water the moment your shadow crosses. That wariness is the animal, and it's why these are turtles to watch rather than hold. They're quick, alert, long-lived, and unforgiving about exactly one thing. A map turtle lives in its own water, so the filter and the water-change schedule are the real hobby, not the tank.

AT A GLANCE

Difficulty	Intermediate
Water temp	75–80 °F
Basking spot	85–92 °F
Night	68–74 °F
UVB	Required; 10.0 T5 HO at 12–14 in
Diet	Pellets, insects, greens
Feeding	Juv. daily, adults alternate days
Adult size	3.5–10 in; females much larger
Lifespan	20–30 years



Captive-bred Mississippi maps fill turtle tables at NARBC shows. The name comes from the fine maplike lines on the shell.

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01

Watch, Don't Handle

Map turtles are the nervous athletes of the American river. Approach the tank and they're off the log and under the water before you've finished the step. That's not a flaw; it's the species. Handle one only when you must, for a health check or a move, and expect scratching and a serious bite from a big female. As a display animal in clean, moving water a map turtle is superb. As a lap pet it's miserable.

02

Room to Swim

Think in water volume as much as floor space. Every stage wants a horizontal footprint and real depth to swim: these are river turtles, and racks are never appropriate for them. A hatchling starts at 24×12×12, an adult needs 72×24×24 at minimum, and a stock tank or pond is the honest long-term answer for a full-grown female. House them one to a tank. Males stay small, females get heavy, and in shared water that gap means bitten tails and a small turtle kept off the basking spot.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	24×12×12	36×18×18	A real swimmer: give deeper water than a musk turtle needs.
Juvenile	36×18×18	48×18×18	Strong swimmers; they work a filter's current all day.
Subadult	48×24×18	72×24×24	Sizes split here: females outgrow males by a wide margin.
Adult	72×24×24	Stock tank or pond	Females 6–10 in, males 3.5–5 in. Strong filtration and hard UVB basking.

Habitat-OS life-stage guidance (Mississippi map turtle, the hobby benchmark).

03

Heat, Light, and the Basking Site

Water sits at 75–80 °F; nights can drop to 68–74 °F without harm. The basking platform is the other half of the job: a dry surface under the lamp reading 85–92 °F, big enough for the whole shell to leave the water. Run a 10.0 T5 HO tube on top of the screen, 12–14 in above that platform, for about UVI 3 at the shell. Glass blocks UVB entirely; mesh costs a quarter to half the rest. Tubes fade before they die; replace on the maker's schedule. Guard any submersible heater; turtles crack glass.

04

The Water Is the Enclosure

Humidity means nothing here. Water quality means everything. Map turtles are messy eaters and heavy waste producers, and dirty water is the shortest road to shell rot and swollen, shut eyes. Run a canister or sump rated well past the volume you actually keep, siphon the debris you can see, and change water on a fixed schedule rather than when it starts to look bad. **Filtration you think is overkill is about right, and it never replaces water changes.**

05

Bottom, Flow, and Furniture

Go bare-bottom, or use river stone too large to swallow; fine gravel gets eaten and blocks guts. Everything else in there should earn its place: driftwood and rock to wedge under, a filter outflow aimed to give them a current worth fighting, and a ramp a small male can climb as easily as a heavy female. Live plants are salad, not decor, so buy them expecting to replace them. Shift the hardscape now and then, because these turtles notice.

06

Pellets, Bugs, and Greens

A good aquatic turtle pellet is the backbone. Around it, rotate insects, the occasional snail or crayfish, and leafy greens. Greens go in with every meal, taken or ignored. Juveniles eat daily, adults every other day, and portions stay small. Overfed turtles grow fast and lumpy, and that never smooths out. Feed in a tub for cleaner water. Float a cuttlebone, dust insects with plain calcium, D3-free and phosphorus-free, and add a multivitamin weekly while growing, twice monthly as an adult.

07

Health Red Flags

Learn the swim. A turtle that lists to one side, floats stern-up, or cannot stay down is telling you something is wrong, and respiratory infection is the first suspect; open-mouth breathing or bubbling nostrils makes it urgent. Watch also for eyes swollen shut, soft or pitted patches on the shell, and a turtle that quits basking. Test the water the same day; the answer is often in there. Any of those signs is a reptile vet, 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.