



Razor-Backed Musk Turtles

Sternotherus carinatus

BEGINNER · 4-6 IN ADULT · 20-30 YR LIFESPAN · BOTTOM WALKER · SOUTHERN U.S.

Most aquatic turtles outgrow the tank they were bought for. Razorbacks don't. They stay palm-sized for life, walk the bottom instead of swimming over it, and carry the sharp tented keel that names them. Hardy, beginner-friendly, and awake enough to be worth watching. The honest headline is plumbing: a small turtle still makes a large mess, and it's the water, not the animal, that fails first.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Beginner
Water temp	72-78 °F
Basking spot	85-90 °F
UVB	Recommended
Adult volume	Roughly 55-75 gallons
Diet	Carnivore: pellets, insects, fish
Feeding cadence	Every 1-2 days
Adult size	4-6 inches
Lifespan	20-30 years



Captive-bred razorbacks are a fixture of the aquatic tables at NARBC shows. The species is named for the sharp keel down its shell.

Photo: Photographer: LA Dawson / iNaturalist · CC BY-SA

01

Hardy, and Not for Handling

Razorbacks are watchers, not pets you hold. They are less shy than the common musk and will patrol the glass at feeding time, but a cornered one bites hard for its size and can reach a fair way back along its own shell. Handle only to move or examine the animal, then set it down. Keep them one to a tank. Musk turtles settle arguments over basking space and food by biting tails and legs, and the loser quietly stops eating.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Footprint beats height. These are bottom walkers, so give them floor to cross rather than water to climb. Hatchlings start shallow at 16×10×10, and an adult wants 48×18×18 at minimum, 60×24×18 if you have the room, or roughly 55-75 gallons. Razorbacks are not strong swimmers. **Every part of the tank must let the turtle reach air without swimming for it**, so stack wood, plants and a ramped basking platform through the depth.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	16×10×10	20×12×12	Shallow water only. A hatchling drowns in depth it cannot climb out of.
Juvenile	20×12×12	30×12×12	Common-musk care, one size up. Add depth as swimming strength arrives.
Subadult	36×18×12	48×18×18	Outgrows <i>S. odoratus</i> . Floor length matters more than water height.
Adult	48×18×18	60×24×18	Largest musk turtle. Budget 55-75 gallons and filtration to match.

Minimum and preferred footprints in inches, from Habitat-OS life-stage guidance.

03

Heat, Basking and UVB

Hold the water at 72–78 °F with a guarded submersible heater, and check it against a thermometer you trust: a stuck heater goes wrong fast. Nights can sit at 68–72 °F. Above the waterline, a dry platform under a lamp at 85–90 °F lets the shell dry out completely, which is half of preventing shell rot. UVB is recommended, and the tube fades long before it stops lighting up. Razorbacks bask less than sliders, so make the one spot they use worth the trip.

04

Water Quality & Filtration

This is the whole game. A turtle eats and messes in the water it lives in, so over-filter for far more volume than you actually hold and run mechanical and biological media together. Change a real share of the water weekly, siphoning the floor as you go, and keep testing until ammonia and nitrite hold at zero. Dechlorinate every drop that goes in. When the tank starts to smell, the shell pays before you notice.

05

Bottom, Wood and Cover

Bare glass is honest and easy to keep clean. If you want a bottom, use river stone too large to swallow and skip gravel, which musk turtles pick up and pay for. Furnish the middle of the tank instead. Driftwood, cork and heavy silk or hardy live plants give a poor swimmer somewhere to hook a claw and rest halfway up. A turtle with cover is a turtle you see more of, not less.

06

Feeding

Razorbacks are carnivores: a quality aquatic turtle pellet as the base, plus insects and fish. Wild ones work snails and crayfish, and whole shelled foods are worth offering to jaws built for crushing. Feed every 1–2 days and keep the portions small. The classic mistake is a turtle fed like a puppy, which grows a lumpy shell and fouls water faster than any filter can answer. Feed in a separate tub if you want the filter to last.

07

Health Red Flags

Learn the shell. Soft spots, pitted or weeping scutes and a bad smell up close are shell rot, traced back to dirty water or a basking spot that never dries. Swollen or closed eyes point the same way, or at a thin diet. Listing to one side, floating nose-up, open-mouth breathing or bubbles at the nostrils mean respiratory infection. Any of those, or an animal that goes off food and stays off it, is a reptile-vet appointment. Test the water the same day.

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.