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Cooter Turtles (*Pseudemys* spp.); Florida, Peninsula, Texas, Northern Red-Bellied, Florida Red-Bellied, River

Large, Southern Baskers

Cooters are large, semi aquatic turtles with a domed to semi domed carapace ranging from brown, olive brown, greenish, or grayish in color, oftentimes with paler markings on the carapace. The head, neck, limbs, and skin range from blackish, greenish, to olive brown with yellowish, reddish, to orangeish radiating stripes, streaks, or dashes. The plastron ranges from pale cream colored, yellowish, to reddish orange depending on the species. As with many other emydid turtles, cooters are frequent baskers, and may often be seen basking during warm or sunny conditions on or along river or stream banks, submerged rocks, locks, or other debris, where they will usually quickly dive into the water if disturbed or approached too closely. Common species include the River Cooter (*Pseudemys concinna*), Florida Red bellied Cooter (*Pseudemys nelsoni*), Peninsula Cooter (*Pseudemys peninsularis*), and Northern Red bellied Cooter (*Pseudemys rubriventris*). Cooters are very popular pet turtles in the pet industry, but grow to large sizes, require frequent cleaning, and considerable space.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Testudines

Suborder: Cryptodira

Superfamily: Testudinoidea

Family: Emydidae

Genus: *Pseudemys*

Species: *Pseudemys* spp.*

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

Cooter turtles may attain longevity of 30 to 40 years or more under the correct care and

conditions.

Distribution and Habitat

Depending on the species and subspecies, cooters are very widely distributed turtles over much of the southern, south central, southeastern, and eastern United States, and into Mexico, and through much of Central America to Panama. Within this range, cooters are aquatic to semi-aquatic turtles that occupy a variety of permanent to semi-permanent water bodies including ponds, lakes, rivers, streams, and their basins, marshes, swamplands, ditches, and even garden, ornamental, and other agricultural and/or suburban to urban areas with ample basking areas within or near the water such as partially submerged rocks, logs, and other nearby or overhanging vegetation or debris, banks, and other similar areas.

Origin/History

Pseudemys spp. Gray, 1856. The genus *Pseudemys* was first described by John Edward Gray in 1856. Other, more specific species and subspecies would have other authors first describing them during other years. Common *Pseudemys* spp. which would be available as pets include the River Cooter (*Pseudemys concinna*), Florida Red bellied Cooter (*Pseudemys nelsoni*), Peninsula Cooter (*Pseudemys peninsularis*), and Northern Red bellied Cooter (*Pseudemys rubriventris*).

In the United States, cooters and other freshwater turtles became popular as pets in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly after the release of the popular children's book "Yertle the Turtle" by Dr. Seuss in 1958 as well as the cartoon "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles". This led to an increase in demand for pet turtles, including all of the *Pseudemys* species. In 1975, the USDA would prohibit the commercial sale of hatchling turtles with a carapace under 4 inches in length, citing widespread salmonellosis concerns, although these turtles would continue to be available as pets either through unlawful sales, or through loopholes allowing them to be sold for bona-fide scientific, research, and educational purposes.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate to Advanced.

Size

Adult cooters usually reach a carapace, or upper shell length of 9 to 12 inches, with females being larger. Cooters sometimes reach even larger sizes of 15 to 16 inches carapace length.



Ideal Housing/Enclosure Setups for Cooters and Other Aquatic Turtles.

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Semi-Aquatic. Cooter turtles are semi aquatic turtle species. Provide a sturdy, escape proof aquarium or commercially available plastic or galvanized stock tank or turtle tub of sufficient size with an elevated dock or basking area/access to dry land using a substrate dam. The latter are perhaps preferred for maintaining aquatic to semi-aquatic turtles in, as they are easier to clean, move/transport, and maintain than aquariums. Provide a minimum of 10 gallons of space per inch of shell, or about 50 to 120 gallons for most adult cooter turtles. A general rule of thumb to follow for most aquatic to semi-aquatic turtles is to provide water that is at least 1 ½ to 2 times the turtle's height in depth to allow for complete submersion, and at least two to three times the carapace length for adequate swimming and movement. A powerful water filter rated at least twice that of the amount of water in the enclosure is highly recommended for aquatic turtles, as they are messy and require frequent cleaning and regular water changes. Use a submersible water heater with a guard to maintain water temperatures of 75 to 85 degrees F. Substrate is optional, and foregoing it makes for easier cleaning and maintenance, but small to medium sized gravel can be used. Additional rocks, logs, live or artificial foliage can also be provided for additional foraging, basking, and hiding opportunities.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Providing the correct amounts of UVA/UVB overhead incandescent and florescent lighting, and calcium-to-phosphorus ratios is essential for ensuring the health and overall well-being of cooters in captivity. Without UVA/UVB, or adequate amounts of it, they can be susceptible to the abnormal bone and shell growth and development known as Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD), and other health and development maladies. Pyramiding of the scutes and shell can also occur due to poor or improper diet, lighting, or heating. Always be sure to spot clean the enclosure for urates, feces, or uneaten food at least twice per week. Be sure to periodically replace the substrate, clean, and disinfect the enclosure and its furnishings at minimum every 2 to 3 months. These turtles require a thermal gradient using a ceramic or radiant heat emitter, UTH (or under tank heating pad), and UVA/UVB overhead lighting. Provide a basking area or platform for your cooter to emerge completely from the water and monitor at around 85 to 90 degrees F. Cool end and ambient enclosure temperatures should be 70 to 82 degrees F. More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs,

as well as those of one's animals can be given as well. While humidity is somewhat less important for most aquatic to semi-aquatic turtles, a general humidity level should be at, or around about 60 to 75%.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Herbivorous to Omnivorous; In the wild, cooter turtles are primarily omnivorous to carnivorous, feeding on aquatic to semi-aquatic insects, crustaceans, mollusks, and other invertebrates, as well as smaller vertebrates including small fish, amphibians, and carrion, or dead and decaying plant and animal material. Some algae and other aquatic plants may also be consumed.

In captivity, variety is important with most aquatic to semi-aquatic turtle's diets. Cooter turtles can be given feeder insects of appropriate size including crickets, roaches, mealworms, waxworms, superworms, or other invertebrates. They can also eat small, frozen-thawed rodents of appropriate size, but offer these sparingly, if at all. Other food items that will be accepted by these turtles can include many of the commercially available aquatic to semi-aquatic turtle or omnivore mix diets, small feeder fish of appropriate nutritional value, earthworms, redworms, freeze dried shrimp or krill, or some other meats. Dog and cat foods can also be used, but use these sparingly, if at all as well. Commercially available canned or pelleted turtle diets are not good staples for feeding aquatic to semi-aquatic turtles, and should not exceed roughly 25% of their diets; Variety is always best.

They can also be fed some chopped greens, fruits, and vegetable material as well. Gutloading any feeder insects and providing additional calcium and vitamin D3 is essential for these turtle's optimal health and well-being. Without proper supplementation, they are susceptible to Metabolic Bone Disease, pyramiding of the shell, and other abnormal bone, growth, and health maladies. Feeding frequency will depend on the age, size, and overall health of your turtle, but typically in most cases should be twice to three times weekly. Do not overfeed them, though as obesity and other health related issues can become a concern. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Handling

Captive born and raised cooters can become very tame and personable pets, often even approaching their keepers for food. Most small to mid-sized turtle and tortoise species that are not aggressive or prone to biting can be picked up and handled either by placing both hands along both sides of the shell, or from the rear of the carapace with the thumb on the carapace and index through pinky fingers on the plastron to reduce the chances of being kicked, scratched, or nipped when they are threatened. Although most species of chelonians are not outwardly aggressive, defensive, or dangerous, they can become stressed as a result of over-handling, however, and some species, and even individual animals can be shy than others. These are some considerations to keep in mind when handling any chelonian species.

****Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens****

Contact

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Disclaimer: Note that the information provided in these, or any care sheets, are not intended to be all-exhaustive, and further research and care should always be sought and provided when it comes to any

species one may prospectively be interested in. These care sheets are also not intended to serve as substitutes for professional veterinary medical care and husbandry should any animal require it. Always seek proper and professional veterinary care for any animal should the need arise, and be prepared ahead of time for any and all husbandry costs and expenses that may occur with any animal beyond the initial purchase. Any animal owned is ultimately a matter of personal/individual care and responsibility. We cannot make any claims or guarantees regarding any information in this care sheet therein. This care sheet may be reprinted or redistributed only in its entirety.

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