



Common Musk Turtles

Sternotherus odoratus

BEGINNER · 3-5 IN ADULT · HIGHLY AQUATIC · BOTTOM WALKER · EASTERN NORTH AMERICA

Meet the stinkpot. The common musk turtle is one of North America's smallest turtles, a palm-sized bottom-walker that patrols the floor of ponds and slow creeks rather than swimming open water. It's the aquatic turtle for people without room for a slider: hardy, modest, endlessly watchable. The honest trade: this is a look-don't-touch pet, and a startled one earns its nickname.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Beginner
Water temp	72-78 °F
Basking spot	85-90 °F
Night temp	68-72 °F
UVB	Required
Diet	Carnivore: pellets, insects, worms
Feeding	Every 1-2 days
Adult size	3-5 in
Water depth	10-15 in (adult tank)



A bold little bottom-walker that earns its 'stinkpot' nickname only when stressed. Look for captive-bred hatchlings at NARBC shows.

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01

Small, Bold, Hands-Off

Musk turtles are tiny, hardy and surprisingly bold; most learn to beg at the glass within weeks. Handling is another story. A stressed musk turtle releases the musky odor that earned the species its 'stinkpot' nickname, and that long, flexible neck can reach fingers you thought were safe. Hold one only when you must, from the rear of the shell, and keep sessions short. This is a watching animal, and it's genuinely good at being watched.

02

Housing by Life Stage

This is the aquatic turtle an apartment can actually hold. Where a slider demands a pond-sized setup, an adult musk turtle lives well in a 48×18×18 tank, 60×18×18 preferred. At this species' 10-15 inches, that's roughly 40-55 gallons of water. Prioritize floor space over depth: these are walkers, not swimmers. Hatchlings are genuinely poor swimmers, so start them shallow with easy routes to the surface. And house singly; musk turtles kept together trade bites, not company.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	16×10×10	20×12×12	Poor swimmers, so keep water shallow with easy surface access.
Juvenile	20×12×12	30×12×12	Bottom-dwelling from day one; decor and cover matter.
Subadult	36×18×12	40×18×18	Reaches adult size in 3-4 years.
Adult	48×18×18	60×18×18	Water 10-15 in deep; a ~40-55 gal aquarium serves an adult for life.

Habitat-OS life-stage guidance. Footprint beats height. This turtle walks the bottom; it doesn't cruise open water.

03

Heat, Light & UVB

Keep the water at 72–78 °F with a guarded submersible heater (turtles are hard on equipment), and don't sweat an overnight dip to 68–72 °F. Above one corner, hang a basking lamp that brings a dry dock to 85–90 °F. Musk turtles bask less than sliders, and some prefer to loiter just under the lamp at the surface, but the option must exist. UVB is required, not optional: run a UVB tube over the dock and replace it on schedule, since output dies long before the light does.

04

Water Quality & Filtration

Water quality is the whole job with an aquatic turtle. A carnivore that eats in the water it lives in fouls that water fast, and chronically dirty water comes back later as shell rot, raw skin and infection. So **over-filter, then change water anyway**: run a filter rated for more tank than you own, do a partial water change every week, and dechlorinate what goes back in. Learn basic aquarium cycling before the turtle arrives. Ammonia you can't see is still ammonia.

05

Furnishing the Bottom

Furnish for a walker. Musk turtles spend their day patrolling the floor, so the floor is the habitat: driftwood, rock piles, caves and thickets of live or fake plants that let a small turtle feel hidden. Keep substrate simple (bare bottom, fine sand, or stones too large to swallow). In deeper adult water, 10–15 inches, lean wood and plants against the glass as ladders; a bottom-walker likes to climb to the surface for air, not swim for it.

06

Feeding

Musk turtles are carnivores with big appetites for their size. Build the diet on a quality aquatic-turtle pellet, then rotate in insects, earthworms and the odd bit of fish; feed every 1–2 days, a portion roughly the size of the turtle's head. Everything is eaten underwater, so feed in the tank and let the filter work, or use a separate feeding tub to keep the main water cleaner. The begging never stops. The portions still should.

07

Health Red Flags

Watch the shell and the swim. Soft spots, pits or a foul-smelling patch of shell mean rot; white fuzz on skin means fungus. Both start with clean water and a vet call. A turtle floating crooked or listing, blowing bubbles, or basking around the clock is showing you a respiratory infection: that's a reptile-vet visit now, not a forum thread. Swollen eyes and refused food round out the list. When in doubt, test your water the same day; most turtle trouble starts there.

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.