

CREATURE CARE SHEET

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Common Musk Turtle

Sternotherus oderatus

Sternotherus oderatus, also known as the common musk turtle or "stinkpot" is a fascinating little turtle. Beyond its unassuming carapace lies an interesting natural history, some behavioral traits that are anything but common, and a personality that is both feisty - and completely engaging.

Stinkpots are small turtles, with two distinguishing beige or yellow stripes that run from the top and bottom nares of their slightly pointed snout and across the side of their face. It has a domed carapace, a slightly hinged plastron, and under its chin and throat are small beard-like barbels. They are chiefly nocturnal, as evidenced by their large dark eyes, and in the evenings and early mornings you may see them trotting along in the shallows on a river bottom, foraging for food, and using their long neck both to reach their prey and to crane their head up to the surface for a breath of air. They are also accomplished swimmers capable of inhabiting deeper water and when so motivated, will sail through the water with neck extended.

The natural range of *S. oderatus* is rather large, extending from Quebec and southern Ontario in Canada and from Maine to Florida and west to Texas and Wisconsin in the US. *S. oderatus* is omnivorous, with juveniles being more carnivorous, and will feed on aquatic snails, carrion, fish eggs, worms, leeches, aquatic insects, larva, algae and aquatic vegetation. They have a sharp beak and strong jaws and care should be taken when handling them. Not all stinkpots will bite, but if annoyed or threatened, they are capable of extending their long neck and, in a flash, can whip it back across their carapace and clamp down on an unsuspecting finger.

In captivity we want to provide these turtles with an environment that will most closely resemble the conditions of their wild habitat and keep stress to a minimum. Because of their small size, a shallow plastic storage container can meet their needs nicely. They can also be set up quite attractively in an aquarium. Individual personalities differ. Some stinkpots are quite curious and responsive, others are very shy and secretive, but in either case, giving them plant cover in the tank will reduce stress and make them feel more secure. I use small smooth stones as a substrate in my set-up, and soft fern-like plastic plants that trail over sections of the water, which is kept at a depth that allows them to easily reach their head up to the surface while standing on the bottom. As a chiefly nocturnal species, a basking spot is not required.

These turtles have also been kept successfully in ambient light without UV-B, but if additional UV-B lighting is desired, a means for retreat should be provided. Such lighting will be necessary if live aquatic plants are included. A piece of cork bark wedged well above the water-line across one side of the tank could provide such retreat, and would also enable the turtle easy access to the surface beneath it for breathing. The inclusion of a riverbank could be added by grading the substrate in a portion of the tank. In the wild, the musk turtle may emerge from the water, often just partially. Such an area with a portion of suitable substrate could also provide a nesting site for gravid females.

Cheshire Waterlife & Falconry Centre
Tel: 01606 882223

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In a shallow 24 x 18 inch tank, which used for one turtle, heat is provided from one submersible aquarium heater located at one end. This allows the turtle to thermoregulate as needed. Keeping in mind their preference for slow-moving water an internal canister filter, directed such that it gently circulates the warmed water by the heater to other areas of the tank. The inclusion of a small airstone can also be beneficial. Though it is best to provide the turtle with a captive habitat similar to it's own, they can be kept at an acceptable active temperature range from 21-24C (75-78F) and provided with a gradient. By providing options in the habitat, and carefully watching the turtle's behavior and preferences, you will learn more about its environmental needs, and be able to make appropriate modifications.

A healthy stinkpot will eat heartily, and after a settling in period, should accept suitable prey items (that can be dusted with a calcium and multi-vitamin/mineral supplement), and prepared food, such as Reptomin. Provide a variety of food items, including vegetation. They will likely nibble at aquatic plants such as duckweed, water lettuce and water hyacinth, if offered.

It is always important to monitor water conditions- smelly or cloudy water is not good and will eventually lead to health problems. Water changes and good filtration assist in this process.