

It is Important to Avoid

- Excessive handling
- Crowded conditions that can cause stress and aggression
- Poor water quality
- Enclosure furniture that can trap your turtle
- Exposure to other pets that can harm your turtle

Common Disorders

- Eye disease, vitamin A deficiency
- Metabolic bone disease, calcium/vitamin D deficiency
- Shell disease
- Skin infections
- Respiratory disease
- Injuries from cage mates
- Intestinal parasites
- Obesity

Additional Reading

Care of the west African mud turtle, La'Toya Latney, DVM
<https://lafeber.com/vet/wp-content/uploads/Mud-Turtle-Latney-Penn.pdf>

Species profile on West African mud turtles, Kévin Labille
<https://theturtleroom.com/species-profiles/pelusios-castaneus-castaneus>

West African Mud Turtle Care Sheet, Chris Leone
<http://www.reptilesmagazine.com/Care-Sheets/West-African-Mud-Turtle>

NOTE: Most, if not all, reptiles and amphibians carry *Salmonella* bacteria in their intestinal tract and intermittently or continuously shed these bacteria in their feces, so they are unsuitable pets for very young children and those with compromised immune systems. Good hygiene must always be practiced around all reptiles and amphibians, including boa constrictors.

For more information, please see the handout, *Salmonella Information for Reptile Owners* at <http://arav.org/salmonella-bacteria-reptiles>.

HOW TO KEEP YOUR AFRICAN SIDE- NECKED TURTLE HEALTHY, HAPPY AND SAFE!



Published by

MJB MANAGEMENT, LLC

Contributors:
Sue Horton, DVM
Louisa Asseo, DVM, DABVP (c/f)



NATURAL HISTORY

African side-necked turtles, also called African mud turtles, are small semi-aquatic turtles (or terrapins) found in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. The *Pelusios* genus of side-necked turtle includes about 15 species, with *Pelusios castaneus* being the most common in the pet trade. They are hardy and adaptable terrapins that can be found in rivers, ponds, swamps and mud holes. In intolerable, or very dry conditions, they can aestivate in the ground waiting for more appropriate conditions. These turtles earn their common name as they cannot completely retract their head into their shell. Instead, they turn their head sideways to retract under their carapace, or top portion of the shell.

African side-necked turtles are uniformly light brown to black in color with most of the markings found on the head. Yellow to brown markings and spots or speckles make up the head patterns. They appear to have a grin when seen from the front. They have strong claws and semi-webbed feet.

What to Expect From My Animal

African side-necked turtles are medium sized terrapins ranging from 7-12 inches (18-31 cm) when full grown.

African side-necked turtles are a relatively calm and adaptable species. They are not prone to biting, instead preferring to retreat into their shell when threatened. Like most water turtles, they don't enjoy routine handling, but they will recognize their owners as the source of food and come to the sides of their habitat when they see you.

They are aggressive eaters and may mistake a hand or finger for food, so care must be taken to not get bitten during feeding time.

These terrapins do not shed scutes (the surface of the shell) like other water turtles, they instead shed their skin in patches, similar to how a lizard does.

Is My Animal Male or Female?

Male turtles tend to have longer tails that are thicker at the tail base while females tend to have shorter and thinner tails. The cloacal vent is positioned close to the plastron (bottom shell) in females and closer to the tip of the tail in males. Male turtles can have longer nails on the front limbs when compared with females.

Housing and Substrate

As a semi-aquatic species, African side-necked turtles should be housed with both land and water regions in their habitats. Larger terrariums are best. An adult turtle requires a 40-gallon (150 liter) terrarium at a minimum. If you wish to house multiple turtles together, care must be taken to assure there is enough room and hiding spaces to avoid aggression. Providing a large enclosure for multiple turtles is a requirement for care.

Terrarium substrate can range from no substrate to sand or large gravel. Tanks without substrate are much easier to keep clean and minimize accidental substrate ingestion. However, using a particulate substrate does provide enrichment by stimulating and encouraging the natural behaviors of rooting and digging. If gravel is used as a substrate, the gravel size must be large enough to prevent accidental ingestion.

This species tends to live in stagnant and cloudy water in the wild. They will handle murky water better than other aquatic turtles. However, in captivity, it is important to have good quality filtration and provide frequent water changes. Please refer to the ARAV informational husbandry brochure on Water Quality for more details.

WHAT YOUR VETERINARIAN LOOKS FOR IN A HEALTHY AFRICAN SIDE-NECKED TURTLE

Vital Statistics:

Body length

7-12 inches (18-31 cm)

Lifespan

25 years average in captivity, but 30-50 years has been reported

● Bright, alert and responsive attitude

● Nares free of discharge or excessive bubbles

● Head symmetrical with no swellings

● Clear eyes free from discharge

● Strong withdrawal response if a foot is pulled

● Shell hard and symmetrical without injuries, ulcerations or pyramiding

● Symmetrically buoyant with normal equilibrium when floating or swimming

● Limbs and tail free of swellings or ulcerations

● Well-muscled legs



African side-necked turtles live in shallow water in nature, thus the depth of the water column provided in your terrarium only needs to be 6-8 inches (15-20 cm) deep.

As a somewhat timid species, African side-necked turtles appreciate hiding locations. Tank decor that provides for visual barriers is critical. Provide live or fake aquarium plants for both decor and hiding spots. These turtles also appreciate half logs, rocks, driftwood, or other hiding spaces. Use caution to make sure these hiding spaces are secure and cannot shift and trap your turtle under water.

A dry dock or basking space must also be provided as the land portion of the enclosure. This area must be large enough to allow for your turtle to exit the water completely and bask. This area must be secured to prevent escape and injury to your turtle. Basking lights and UVB lighting should be positioned over this basking spot.

Temperature and Humidity Requirements

There should be a basking spot provided where the temp reaches 90-95°F (32-35°C). Temperature on the cool side of the enclosure should be 75-85°F (24-29°C).

The water temperature should be 75-80°F (24-27°C). Achieving and maintaining this water temperature is important to your turtle's health. Use water heaters and thermostats approved for aquariums.

As a semi-aquatic species, maintaining ambient humidity is not critical.

Lighting Requirements

A good quality UVB bulb must be provided. Please refer to the ARAV informational husbandry brochure on UV Lighting for more details. UVB lighting should be provided for 10-12 hours per day.

Diet

African side-necked turtles are omnivorous animals that enjoy a wide variety of food items. Juvenile turtles are primarily carnivorous. As these turtles mature, they gradually move towards a more plant-based diet. The majority of their diet should be a high-quality turtle pellet to provide balanced nutrition. This diet should be supplemented with occasional lettuces and vegetables. Fresh meat sources such as pinkie mice, fish, and earthworms, should also be offered. The size of fresh prey items fed should be based on your turtle's size.

Supplements

If a high-quality turtle pellet is being fed, additional dietary supplements are not needed.

Tips For a Happy, Healthy Animal

- Take your newly acquired turtle to an experienced reptile veterinarian
- Provide clean water and an adequate basking location
- Provide multiple locations for hiding
- Provide UV lighting
- Enclosures that prevent escape
- Balanced nutrition with a high-quality turtle pellet