Saltwater Fish Care Checklist

A printable starter checklist from the Reefify beginner pillar guide. Work top to bottom — don't skip the cycle.

1. Equipment shopping list

- [ ] 30–55 gallon glass tank (avoid tanks under 20g for a first build)
- [ ] Reef-ready stand rated for full water weight
- [ ] Reef LED light (basic model is fine for fish-only)
- [ ] 1–2 powerheads sized for 15–20× tank turnover
- [ ] Protein skimmer sized for your tank volume
- [ ] 200–300W heater plus a digital thermometer
- [ ] Reef salt mix and a refractometer (never a swing-arm hydrometer)
- [ ] RO/DI water source — tap water is not acceptable
- [ ] Saltwater test kit (ammonia, nitrite, nitrate, pH — API or Salifert)
- [ ] Quality flake plus frozen mysis or brine shrimp
- [ ] Fish net, siphon, and a 5-gallon bucket dedicated to the tank
- [ ] Optional but recommended: 10-gallon quarantine tank with sponge filter

2. Setup & cycle (weeks 1–6)

- [ ] Rinse sand, dry-stack rock outside the tank, and aquascape with open swim lanes
- [ ] Fill with RO/DI, mix salt to 1.025 SG at 78°F, verify with a calibrated refractometer
- [ ] Install light, powerheads, heater, and skimmer; run dark for 24h to check leaks and temp
- [ ] Dose ammonia to 2 ppm (or drop in a raw shrimp) to start the nitrogen cycle
- [ ] Test every 3 days — cycle is done when ammonia + nitrite hit 0 within 24h of dosing
- [ ] Do a 20% water change with pre-mixed saltwater before adding livestock

3. First livestock (beginner-proof picks)

- [ ] Add snails and hermit crabs first to graze diatoms — wait a full week
- [ ] Add one hardy fish: captive-bred ocellaris clownfish, firefish goby, or royal gramma
- [ ] Drip acclimate every new fish for 45 minutes before releasing
- [ ] Quarantine every new fish 2–4 weeks in a bare 10g tank before the display
- [ ] Avoid tangs, mandarins, angels, and wild-caught fish for the first 6 months

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4. Daily 2-minute routine

- [ ] Feed one small pinch of quality food (food hitting sand = too much)
- [ ] Top off evaporation with fresh RO/DI water (never saltwater)
- [ ] Glance at heater, skimmer, powerheads — confirm running normally
- [ ] Watch fish for pinched fins, spots, or hiding behavior

5. Weekly 20-minute routine

- [ ] Test nitrate and phosphate — log the numbers, watch the trend
- [ ] Wipe algae from the glass with a magnetic scraper
- [ ] Change 10% of the water with pre-mixed saltwater matched to 1.025 SG and 78°F
- [ ] Rinse or swap the filter sock / floss (never leave it > 5 days)
- [ ] Empty the skimmer cup and wipe the neck

6. Monthly & quarterly

- [ ] Clean powerhead impellers and heater in a vinegar bath
- [ ] Replace RO/DI filters when TDS reads above 0 at the output
- [ ] Inspect plumbing, tighten fittings, verify GFCI outlet still trips
- [ ] Re-calibrate refractometer against 35 ppt calibration fluid
- [ ] Review stocking against the Reefify Compatibility Checker before any new fish

7. Target parameters (fish-only or mixed reef)

Parameter	Target range	Test frequency
Temperature	77–79 °F	Daily glance
Salinity	1.025 SG (35 ppt)	Weekly
Ammonia	0 ppm	Weekly (after cycle)
Nitrite	0 ppm	Weekly (after cycle)
Nitrate	2–10 ppm	Weekly
Phosphate	0.03–0.08 ppm	Weekly
pH	8.1–8.4	Weekly
Alkalinity	8–9 dKH	Weekly (if dosing)

Need the full guide? Visit **reef-ify.com/guides/saltwater-fish-care-for-beginners** for the beginner pillar, plus free calculators at reef-ify.com/tools (salinity converter, stocking calculator, compatibility checker).

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