

Care of the Leopard Tortoise

Husbandry & Diet Information

Quick Facts about *Geochelone pardalis*

- Lifespan: average 20-50 years
- Average weight: females 13.6 kg (30 lb); males up to 20 kg (45 lb)
- Shell length: 30 -51 cm (12-20 in)

Natural History

The leopard tortoise is the second largest tortoise in Africa, second in size to the African spurred or Sulcata tortoise. These lovely tortoises are found throughout the southern edge of the Sahara and in Southern Africa from the Sudan to Ethiopia. Leopard tortoises inhabit hot arid desert, scrublands, and savannah.

Reproduction

When breeding occurs, a female may lay up to 6 clutches in a year and 8 to 10 egg clutches are deposited. Eggs should be kept in vermiculite at 28°C (82°F) between 70%-80% humidity. Hatchlings arise after 180 days of incubation.

Enclosure

Adult leopard tortoises should be housed outdoors in warm, dry climates, whenever possible. The daytime temperature range should be between 26-29°C (80-85°F) with a basking site at 32-35°C (90-95°F). Nighttime temperature should not drop below approximately 24°C (75°F).

Outdoor housing: Outdoor enclosures should be protected from predators, and heavily planted with small ornamental scrubs and trees. Outdoor pens should also include rocky hiding places as well as additional shade and hiding spots.

Leopard tortoises do not hibernate and should be provided with supplemental heating when night temperatures drop below 15°C (60°F). Housing should be elevated from the ground. Farrowing heating pads (pig blankets) and ceramic heaters suspended from the ceiling help maintain warm temperatures.

Indoor housing: A 40-75 gallon (151-284 L) tank or a 1.2 m by 0.6 m (4 ft by 2 ft) enclosure is appropriate for hatchlings. An indoor enclosure should include an under tank heater, heat lamps, and full spectrum (UVB) lighting. The substrate should be a soil/peat mixture, cypress mulch, or a piece of lawn. Avoid bark, sand, millet, walnut shells, or any substrate that is small enough to be ingested, as MANY reptiles present with substrate impactions.

Place a shallow water bowl in the enclosure that is large enough for soaking. Please soak tortoises in a shallow bowl of warm water twice a week for 10 minutes to encourage drinking and stimulate defecation.

Diet

Leopard tortoises require a high fiber diet that consists mainly of broad, leafy weeds and grass hay such as timothy hay and orchard grass hay. Also offer clover, plantain weeds, sow thistle, dandelions, spineless *Opuntia* cactus pads, prickly pears, and succulents.

Supplement the grass and weed diet with dark, leafy greens high in calcium and vitamins A and C such as dandelion greens, collard greens, turnip greens, mustard greens, romaine, escarole, endive, and red leaf lettuce. Avoid a lot of kale and spinach, as it binds dietary calcium thereby preventing absorption. Iceberg lettuce does NOT contain the nutrition they needs. Limit the amount of vegetables offered that are high in moisture.

Dill, mint, cilantro, and parsley make great treats. Leopard tortoises like petals and blossoms as well, so try pesticide and herbicide free hibiscus, clover, dandelion, and grape leaves.

Dust vegetables with a calcium powder containing vitamin D3. A vitamin supplement can also be mixed with food items to help with dietary vitamin A levels.

Fresh water should be available at all times.

Common Problems

Any changes in appetite and defecation should be noted and you should call the veterinarian. Common problems include:

- Hypocalcemia and metabolic bone disease
- Bladder stones
- Respiratory disease
- Dehydration
- Eye lesions
- Poor diet
- Constipation
- Pyramiding

Reference

Senneke D. Leopard tortoise (*Geochelone pardalis*). World Chelonian Trust Web site. 2006. Available at <http://www.chelonia.org/articles/pardalis.html>. Accessed March 22, 2015.