
AVIAN & EXOTIC CLINIC
Of the Monterey Peninsula

20 Lower Ragsdale Drive
Suite 150
Monterey CA 93940

The Russian Tortoise

(*Testudo horsfieldii*)

By Ken Foose, *Reptiles*, January 2009, ReptileChannel.com

Size: Ranges from 6 to 10 inches long. Females get larger, and they are easy to sex by looking at the tails. Males have much longer tails.

Range: From Afghanistan to northwestern China through the countries of Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Iran and Pakistan.

Natural Habitat: Usually in dry areas with sparse vegetation. Russian tortoises hibernate during winter and aestivate during the summer when temperatures are high. Avid burrowers, they can dig large burrows that might be several feet long.

Captive Housing: Russian tortoises can be housed indoors or out, but outdoors is always preferable. To set up an indoor habitat, start with a plastic tub measuring approximately 3 feet long by 2 feet wide by 1 foot tall. Bigger is always better for this tortoise. Put a heating pad at one end and add a heat lamp directly over the pad. The lamp's wattage depends on the enclosure's height. The goal is to create a hotspot of 90 degrees Fahrenheit. A UVB bulb must be placed over the enclosure in addition to the heat light. This is essential to the tortoise's well-being. Turn the heat lamp and UVB lamp on in the morning, and turn them off at night: 12 hours on and 12 hours off for an indoor enclosure works well. The under-tank heat pad can be left on 24 hours a day.

Cover the bottom with ground-up coconut fiber. This is easy to clean, economical bedding will not impact the tortoise. Place two hiding spots in the enclosure: one near the hotspot and one at the cooler end. Two bowls - one for food and one for water - should also be at the cooler end. Make sure these bowls are shallow so the tortoise can climb in and out of them without the risk of flipping over.

The enclosure's cool end should be about 70 degrees. In the evening, when all lights are off, the ambient temperature should be about 65 degrees. If these tortoises are maintained at constant temperatures year round, they will remain active year round.

The walls of outdoor pens must be made of solid material, such as wood, plastic, or brick or concrete blocks. Provide a burrow for your tortoise. Dig a 2- to 3-foot-long ditch at a 45-degree angle. Its width should be about 1 foot. Once the ditch is complete, cover it with a piece of plywood and leave just the ground-level entrance exposed. Then shovel the dirt back onto the plywood. Plant grass on the mound for a more natural look.

Use the same types of bowls the indoor enclosure requires. A bit of shade and a few hiding places in the pen will appeal to the tortoises.

Russian tortoises can be kept outdoors year round when housed in the appropriate pen. They are most active in the spring and fall: they hibernate and aestivate in the winter and summer. The colder the temperature gets in your area, the deeper the burrow must be to reach below the frost line. A temp of 50 degrees or lower is best for hibernation. If it's any higher, they won't be able to hibernate but will be too cold to eat. On very hot summer days, Russian tortoises are active only for a few hours at dawn. Then they wait out the heat in their burrows.

Diet: Herbivorous. Active grazers when the temperature is right, these tortoises consume a wide variety of weeds and grasses. Fruit is not recommended. Some items they eat with relish include collard greens, beet greens, various grasses and hay, clover, endive, roses and petunias. Several commercial diets specifically developed for tortoises are also on the market. Most of these are eaten with great enthusiasm.

Availability: Imported adults are the most common Russian tortoises available. Adapting well to captivity, they are easy-to-keep pets. After you purchase any animal, I suggest you visit a veterinarian to have it checked for parasites and general health. Captive-bred Russian tortoises are becoming a bit more common and are much more desirable than imports. Although more expensive than their imported brethren, they come in a cute, small size and they prove to be hardy and parasite-free. They grow quickly and are fun to watch.