

Keeping and Breeding The Elongated Tortoise (*Indotestudo elongata*) in the UK.

Habitat

The Elongated Tortoise *Indotestudo elongata* is found throughout Asia and has a very large range. This species is naturally found in India, Bangladesh, Southern China, Burma, Nepal, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia and Kampuchea.

Elongates also survive in very variable habitats from dry forest to open grass land and in some areas arid desert environments.



Description

Elongates typically measure approx 30cm long as adults, males have a longer more elongated carapace than females and both sexes lack a nuchal scute. The carapace is also dorsally flattened in both sexes.

Males typically have a much longer tail than that of the females and also sport a very concave plastron.

Both sexes have a terminal claw or xiphiplastron at the tip of the tail, similar to that of the Hermanns tortoise *Testudo Hermanni*.

The carapace is usually a uniform greenish yellow to olive brown colour, with black to dark brown markings radiating from the centre of each scute. The skin colour is generally brown to dark grey with a vivid yellow head and jet black eyes. During the breeding season both males and females develop a bright pink nose and face. This is due to a hormonal flush of blood which enhances the animal's sense of smell enabling them to find suitable mates.

The legs are slim and long and this species has a rather high gate when walking.

Captive Environment

Elongated tortoises are a tropical species and require warm temperatures to thrive in captivity, this species also benefits from access to outdoors during the summer months. They do not hibernate, although a slight drop in temperature during the winter months is a good stimulant for reproduction.

I currently own 8 adult Elongated tortoises which live in a large well insulated shed approx 6m x 3m with access to a well planted outdoor area approx 4m x 4m.

The indoor air temperatures are kept at approx 24c using wall mounted electric radiators on thermostats. Four uvb power sun lamps are positioned around the enclosure and provide basking temperatures of approx 30 – 35c for 8 hours per day. Elongates are not known to be great baskers although my animals regularly do so, especially during the mornings and early evening.

The indoor and outdoor enclosures have deep substrates approx 20 – 40cm's, this is a mixture of damp beech leaf litter, play pit sand and a good loam based compost. I also scatter a forest/ orchid bark at approx 2 – 4cm across the surface. The deeper areas are regularly turned over and soaked to create suitable nest sites for the females.

I also provide several hide boxes throughout the enclosure as this species has a tendency to be quite shy, especially the females who often need time out from amorous males. Males are often highly aggressive and will fight with one another

For long periods of time if not separated. It is not usually advisable to keep more than one male per enclosure.

Large water bowls are also available at all times and are large enough to allow the animals to soak fully something they do very regularly. Elongates love water and must never be allowed to dehydrate as this can be fatal.

The outdoor enclosure is in full sun during most of the day in the summer months, it is also quite well planted in areas to provide shade and some natural grazing and browsing. They particularly like to browse on a vine which grows over the enclosure and keep it at tortoise height throughout the summer months.

I believe an out door enclosure is essential and my animals spend a lot of time there especially during warm summer showers. The doorway to the shed is open from May until the end of September, although I do tend to shut them up at night. Mainly to protect from night time predators such as foxes and rats.



Diet

Elongated tortoises are typical forest dwellers and tend to do better on a more omnivorous diet than their desert cousins.

Mine thrive on a diet of various edible weeds/flowers and salad greens, with occasional feeds of mixed fruits and animal protein.

Leafy greens should make up to larger part of the animals diet. Leaves such as dandelion, sow thistle, clover, plantain, sedums, goose grass, Opuntia cacti pads, lambs ear lettuce, water cress, curly kale and small amounts of spring greens. All should be washed chopped and mixed with a good calcium D3 supplement before feeding.

A mix of fruit should be fed once to twice per week, fruits such as apple, pear, melon, mango, plums, peaches, apricots, black berries, straw berries, and small amounts of banana can be roughly chopped and again mixed with a good calcium D3 supplement.

Elongates in the wild regularly eat insects, molluscs and carrion and in captivity require a small amount of protein to keep them healthy. High fat animal food such as cat or dog food should be avoided though. I use soaked koi carp pellets, cooked chicken, beans and pulses, earth worms, garden snails and meal worms. Such foods are fed about once per week and always mixed with calcium carbonate powder.

I currently feed my animals once per day and try to give as varied a diet as possible, calcium is vitally important for the long term health of the tortoises and is mixed with food on a daily basis, it is very important to supplement breeding females and growing juveniles daily..

Water is always available and is refreshed daily.

Breeding the Elongated tortoise

Mating can occur at any time of the year, but is usually more commonly seen during the autumn months. Males generally chase the females ramming and butting the back of her carapace similarly to Spur thigh tortoises Testudo graeca. During mating the male makes a long gravelly hissing noise and almost appear to wiggle the female from side to side. Females begin nesting and egg laying around a month to six weeks later, typically they dig a shallow nest of around 10 – 20cm's with their back legs. They can be very choosy when deciding where to nest and it is advisable to provide several nest sites within the habitat to satisfy

this. Usually 3 – 5 eggs are laid, these are quite large at around 50mm long. They may lay more than one clutch and one of my females regularly produces 3 – 4 clutches between October and May. The eggs should be removed to an incubator with a high humidity of 75 – 90 % and a constant temp of 28 – 30c. Hatchlings usually arrive about 110 days later although I have had hatchlings appear later at around 150 – 160 days. Such hatchlings weigh around 20 -30g's and require a warm humid vivarium with constant temperatures around 26 – 32c. provide plenty of uvb light during the day and feed a similar diet to that of the adults. Juveniles grow very quickly and if provided with adequate calcium, D3 and humidity will develop very strong smooth shell growth. In captivity they mature in around 7 – 10 years and with luck will begin to breed at such an age.

Status in the wild

Elongated tortoises once were a very common species in much of their natural range. In fact in Asia it was one of the most common species seen in the wild. Recently though it's population has taken a huge nose dive. This has been mainly caused by over collection for the Chinese food markets, the pet trade, habitat destruction and modern farming techniques. Even today wild Elongated tortoises are the commonest species of tortoise found throughout the Chinese markets. They are routinely hunted with dogs by local people and gathered in their hundreds to be shipped to China, all of which is highly illegal and yet little is done to stop it. Such over collection is not sustainable.

Currently Elongated Tortoises are classed as cites 2 and is presently on the ICUN red list of threatened species.

Conclusion

The Elongated tortoise is not a common species in the UK pet trade, although captive bred juveniles are seen from time to time.

This species is hardy and personable in captivity and with a good environment and variable diet can thrive and regularly reproduce.

As this species quickly disappears from its natural range it is ever more vital that animals become well established in captivity and that every effort is made to breed this species for its future survival.