

Beginners Guide to keeping Leopard Tortoises

Introduction

Leopard tortoises are the fourth largest in the world growing to a shell length of between 40 and 50 cm and weight up to 18 kg with rare, recorded examples of 60 cm length and weights of 36 kg! Their name derives from the spectacular markings that they have on the shells with contrasting black and yellow areas.

Eastern leopard tortoise (*Geochelone pardalis babcocki*)

The genus contains two subspecies of this tortoise, the Eastern Leopard Tortoise (*Geochelone pardalis babcocki*) and the larger and slightly less common Western Leopard Tortoise (*Geochelone pardalis pardalis*). Leopard tortoises range on the savannahs of Africa from the Sudan south to the Cape Province of South Africa.



Housing in captivity.

Except for hatchlings and juveniles, aquaria should be avoided - mesh enclosures are better. As they get larger a custom built pen is the only really adequate housing for them. A medium size leopard tortoise would need a pen at least 10 feet square and if at all possible it is best for them to have access to an outside enclosure in the warmer months (see below).

Because leopard tortoises come from a warmer and dryer climate they don't cope well with high humidity or cooler temperatures. Leopard tortoises require daytime temperatures of 70° - 90° F (21° - 32° C). Ideally night time temperatures should be 70° - 75° F (21° - 24° C), and should not drop below 60° F (15.6° C). Leopard tortoises do not hibernate in the wild and should NEVER be hibernated in captivity.

It is best to keep leopard tortoises in outdoor enclosures in the summer months where they can take advantage of natural UVB light and heat from the sun. In the UK, however, even in the summer, temperatures need to be monitored carefully. A poly tunnel, or, greenhouse with access to an outside grassy area is ideal for the summer months and can extend the period outdoors from late spring to early autumn in suitable years.

Polytunnel pen with access to outside grass enclosure

In colder weather they need to be kept in an indoor enclosure (as described above) with heat and UVB lighting – a range of specialist lighting is available that can provide either UVB alone, or combined with heat. A range of heat sources is available too but heat pads/rocks should not be used as they can cause serious burns to tortoises. Outdoors leopard tortoises will enjoy natural grassy vegetation. Indoors they can be maintained on shredded paper, or, chopped straw. Wood shavings should be avoided as they might affect the long term health of your tortoise. Whatever the substrate being used daily cleaning should be carried out to remove faecal material, urine and uneaten food. Regular, thorough and complete cleaning of the enclosure must also be carried out.

Diet

In Africa leopard tortoises are entirely vegetarian and graze the grasses found naturally on savannah etc. So, in captivity they require a high fibre diet made up of grasses and hay. Large amounts of lettuce, or, fruits should NOT be provided,

although the fruit and pads of the prickly pear (*Opuntia* spp.), if available, are eaten with relish! Leopard tortoises have a healthy thirst and should have access to clean drinking water at all times.

Breeding

In the past leopard tortoises have proven difficult to breed in captivity. The chances of success can be increased by housing animals of similar size together. Small males tend to be attracted to larger females (with greater chances of fertility and egg-laying capability) but sometimes the size difference is so great that it makes mating physically impossible!

A sand-soil mixture can be used to create a contoured egg-laying area and in such a large species needs to be about 12-16 inches deep to allow sufficient depth for digging and burying eggs. Since females often start laying quite late in the day they risk cooling off as night approaches so a strategically placed heat lamp during the nesting period will avoid this situation. Eggs are roughly 40mm in diameter and need an incubation temperature of 30-31°C. They are slow developers and need between 5 and 6 months to hatch.



Hibernation

As already stated these tortoises do not hibernate.

Conclusion

Leopard tortoises are large animals that have very specific needs not best suited to the UK climate. Furthermore, they do not hibernate so anyone intending to keep these animals must have sufficient space, facilities (as described in this article) indoors and outside to provide them with adequate temperatures and UVB throughout the year. This also requires sufficient funds to pay for the heating and lighting costs that will be incurred.

Further Reading

Breeding the Leopard Tortoise, *Geochelone pardalis* in Captivity Andy C.

Highfield and Jill Martin (www.tortoisetrust.org)

Malcolm Pugh & Stuart Smith