

African Pancake Tortoise

Malacochersus tornieri

Reptile

Scientific Name

Malacochersus tornieri

Other Names

Soft-shelled Tortoise

Range

Southern Kenya and northeastern Tanzania

Habitat

Rocky hills in scrub forest and savannas

Average Size

Length: 6 – 8 in.

Weight: 1 – 1 ½ lbs.

Description

Small, brown to brownish-yellow tortoise with dark brown lines radiating out from the center of the thin, two inch tall shell.

Lifespan

Estimated at 25 years

Diet

In the wild: leaves, grasses and fallen fruit

In captivity: mixed vegetables, hay

Incubation Period

113 – 221 days

Clutch Size

1 – 2 eggs

Sexual Maturity

2 – 6 years

Predators

Birds of prey and small carnivores

Population Status

Vulnerable



Behavior

The African Pancake Tortoise is different from most other species of tortoise in that it does not have a high domed shell. Rather than tucking into its shell when threatened, this species uses its strong limbs to run across the rocky terrain searching for a crevice to hide in. Once inside, it will puff up with air and wedge itself further, making it more difficult for predators to remove. The flattened shell not only allows for faster movement and maneuverability, but makes it easier for the tortoises to right themselves should they get flipped over.

Although not truly social, these tortoises have been seen congregating in large numbers near rocky areas (kopjes) of the savanna. They are most active in the morning and during cooler periods of the day, when they forage for food, but never venture far from their rocky, nighttime shelter.

Reproduction and Breeding

In captivity, breeding occurs throughout the year. In the wild, breeding begins in January and February, and nesting begins in August. There is some combat between males for breeding rights to the nearby females, with the larger males having more reproductive success. It has been documented that smaller males won't even approach nearby females if a larger male is in sight.

One to two clutches are laid per year, with just one to two eggs deposited into a shallow sand pit each time. After hatching, the young tortoises receive no parental care and are able to survive on their own.

Conservation

Because they are so popular in the pet trade, many pancake tortoises are illegally removed from the wild. Their low reproductive rate makes it difficult for this species to recover their numbers. Habitat loss and increased land use by humans has further damaged their wild populations.

Amazing Facts

The plastron (underside of the shell) of the pancake tortoise is so thin, it moves when they breathe.

These tortoises estivate (go through a period of dormancy) during the long, hot summers of Africa.

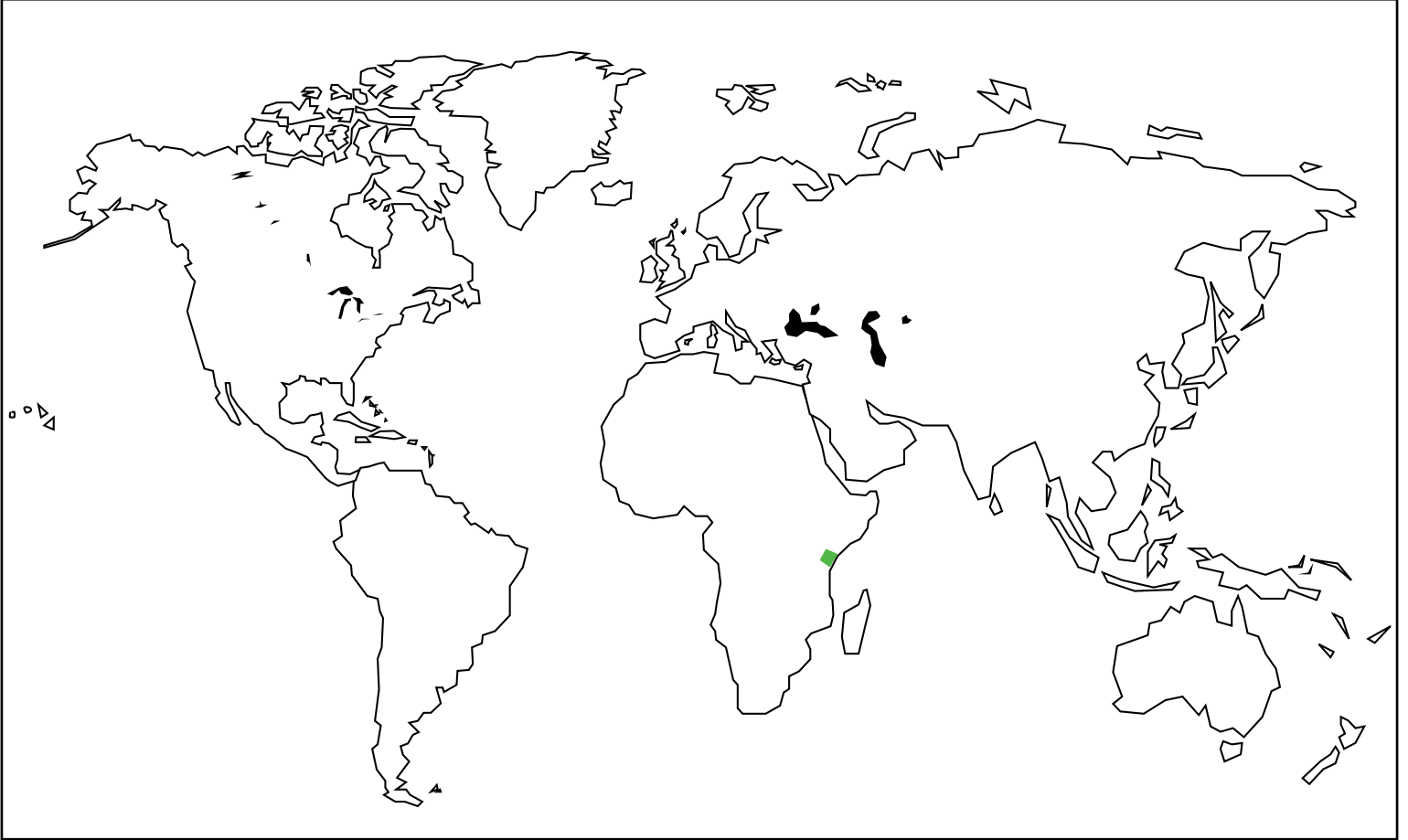
Pancake tortoises are excellent climbers.

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