

Desert Tortoise

Gopherus agassizii

Reptile

Scientific Name

Gopherus agassizii

Other Names

None

Range

Southwestern United States and
Northwestern Mexico

Habitat

Deserts from sandy flats to rocky foothills,
including alluvial fans, washes and canyons

Average Size

Length: 10 – 15 in.
Weight: 10 – 20 lbs.

Description

Male: Medium sized tortoise with a high domed, brown top shell (carapace) and large shovel shaped forefeet. The underside of the shell is concave and has a large protrusion under the head and neck called a gular shield (horn).

Female: Smaller than the male with a flat bottom (plastron) shell and small gular shield.

Lifespan

In the wild: Up to 50 years
In captivity: 80 years +

Diet

In the wild: Grass, cactus, herbs, shrubs, cacti fruit, and flowers
In captivity: Mixed greens and vegetables

Incubation period

90 – 120 days

Sexual Maturity

10 – 20 years

Clutch Size

2 – 14 eggs

Predators

Crows, ravens, coyotes, kit fox, badgers, roadrunners, and humans

Population Status

Federally threatened



Behavior

The desert tortoise is perfectly adapted to life in a harsh, dry habitat. To escape cold winters and hot summers, they dig burrows up to 30 feet long underneath the desert sand. They will share these burrows with other animals and often have more than one scattered across their two acre territory. They are crepuscular and most active in the late spring and early fall, hibernating for up to nine months out of the year.

Males are very territorial and will fight using their gular shield to flip their opponent over onto their back. The battle begins with a series of head bobs and may be accompanied by grunts, wheezes and hisses.

This species of tortoise is able to go for long periods without water, getting most of the moisture it needs from the vegetation it eats. Their large bladder is able to store 40 percent of their body weight in water and waste products. During rainy periods, they may search for temporary pools to drink from to supplement their water supply.

When threatened, the desert tortoise is able to pull most of its body inside the shell, with the only protruding parts covered in thick, heavily armored scales. In a life-threatening situation, they will empty their large bladder on the attacker. This might save their life in the short term, but leaves them vulnerable to dehydration during dry seasons when water is not readily available for replenishing their storage supply.

Reproduction and Breeding

Reproduction and breeding happens in late spring and early summer, although in years of drought and poor food conditions, it may not happen at all. Males use their gular shields to nudge the female during their brief courtship. Females are able to store sperm for five years or more to guarantee reproduction when no males are present and can also produce more than one clutch each year.

Neither parent participates in raising the offspring, so once the young hatch out of the underground nest built by the female, they are on their own. The hatchlings rarely venture far from the nest, traveling 150 feet or less from their burrows in the early years. They are heavily preyed upon and unfortunately the young have a mortality rate in the ninetieth percentile.

(continued on back)

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Conservation

Desert tortoise populations have declined rapidly in the past few decades. In addition to being taken from the wild for use in the pet trade, individual tortoises are threatened by increased human activities and encroachment which fragment their populations and destroy their burrows. They are also susceptible to a fatal respiratory disease in the western Mojave Desert regions.

A sharp increase in raven populations in their desert habitats has had a negative affect on the number of hatchlings that survive. Some of their avian predators have learned to drop the tiny tortoises from high in the air, thus breaking the shells and making them easier to eat.

Recently, efforts have been made to insure separate recreation and tortoise areas in the desert. Construction of pathways under freeways has helped alleviate the number of tortoises hit by cars when crossing or sunning on the warm asphalt macadam. Laws have been passed and enforced regarding molesting and removing tortoises from the wild, which will hopefully ensure the survival of this important species.

Amazing Facts

Other animals rely on the burrows of the Desert tortoise for their homes, including burrowing owls.

The Desert tortoise is the state reptile for California and Nevada.

The average population density for this tortoise is one per every 100 acres.

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