

Madagascar Flat-tailed Tortoise

Pyxis planicauda

Reptile

Scientific Name

Pyxis planicauda

Other Names

Flat-tailed Spider Tortoise

Range

Western Madagascar

Habitat

Deciduous forests

Description

A small tortoise with a striking geometric patterned shell in yellow, tan and black. The head is speckled grey-brown and the legs and beak are yellow. Females are larger than males.

Average Size

Length: 12 – 15 cm

Weight: 250 – 650 g.

Lifespan

In the wild: Estimated at 30 – 50 years

In captivity: 50 +years

Diet

In the wild: Fruit, vegetation, fungus and carrion

In captivity: Mixed vegetables, fungus, and browse

Incubation

250 – 340 days

Sexual Maturity

7 – 12 years of age

Clutch Size

1 egg

Predators

Birds of prey, small carnivores and humans

Population Status

Critically endangered



Behavior

Due to the extreme temperatures in their habitat, Madagascar Flat-tailed Tortoises are only active an average of 6 months each year and have to fit feeding, drinking, mating, and egg laying into this short period of time. During the hot, rainy season from December to May, these tortoises are crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk). Then, in the cool dry season from May to December they bury themselves deep under leaf litter or topsoil and become inactive. This behavior is in response to the unfavorable dry conditions but they may have temporary periods of daytime activity if there is any unseasonal rain. When active, Flat-tailed Tortoises are territorial and move about the forest floor in set home ranges.

Reproduction and Breeding

Madagascar Flat-tailed Tortoises are seasonal breeders in the wild with mating taking place soon after they emerge from dormancy in December. Males fight with other males for access to females but there are no true mating rituals.

Females will lay three to four clutches per year at two to four week intervals in March and April with only one egg per clutch. Incubation is a lengthy process; the eggs go through diapause (a period where development stops) before hatching in the following rainy season when food is plentiful. Neither parent provides care to the offspring who quickly make their way into the forest after hatching.

Conservation

The Madagascar Flat-tailed Tortoise is one of the world's most threatened tortoises with an estimated population of less than 10,000. It is now found only in a very small stretch of forest in one location on the island. Their major threat comes from habitat loss, particularly from burning and clearing forest lands for agriculture, cattle grazing, highway development, mining, and petroleum exploration.

Secondary pressure comes from collection for the pet trade. From 2000 to 2002 a surge of exploitation for the pet trade removed about 4,000 adult animals representing 20 to 40% of the total number of adults. Because their reproductive capacity and juvenile survival rate are particularly low, even by tortoise standards, they are unable to recoup these losses well.

(continued on back)



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Madagascar Flat-tailed Tortoises are listed as critically endangered by IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) and were raised from Appendix II to Appendix I of CITES (Convention for International Trade of Endangered Species) in 2003 which bans all international trade in wild-caught specimens. These laws are thought to have been largely successful, although some suspected illegal collection from the forest continues.

For more information on flat-tailed tortoise conservation efforts, please go to the International Reptile Conservation Foundation at www.ircf.org.

Amazing Facts

The Madagascar Flat-tailed Tortoise is known locally as Kapidolo (ghost turtle) because it is often found around tombs in forested areas.

The only other tortoise in this genus is the Spider Tortoise, also found only on the island of Madagascar.

Flat-tailed Tortoises are found in a habitat that has a very wide climatic range, from below 19 to above 82 degrees Fahrenheit.

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