

Common Spider Tortoise

Pyxis arachnoides arachnoides

Reptile

Scientific Name

Pyxis arachnoides arachnoides

Other Names

None

Range

Coastal areas of southwestern Madagascar

Habitat

Arid to semi-arid forests

Average Size

Length: 6 in.

Weight: 200 – 400 g.

Description

Small turtle with an oblong shell that is highly curved and widens toward the rear. The top of the shell is covered with radiating lines of yellow that form a spider web pattern.

The head is dark and speckled with several yellow spots, with the legs uniform brown.

Lifespan

In the wild: Unknown

In captivity: 50+ years

Diet

In the wild: Grasses, young leaves, roots and insects

In captivity: Mixed vegetables

Incubation Period

220 – 250 days

Clutch Size

One egg, up to three times per year

Sexual Maturity

12 years of age

Predators

Birds of prey, fossa and snakes

Population Status

Critically endangered



Behavior

These tortoises are considered crepuscular, active at dawn and dusk, with most activity in the mornings after sunrise. They are also most active in the wet season, between November and April, when the vegetation is lush. With the commencement of the dry season in April, most Spider tortoises bury themselves deep into the sand and aestivate (like hibernate) for the duration of the colder, drier weather. This saves energy and moisture when vegetation is scarce.

Reproduction and Breeding

Not much is known about the breeding habits of the Spider tortoise, but mating is thought to begin in the spring. During the short four months when they are not in hibernation, the females lay a single egg, which can be repeated for a total of three clutches per year. The young then remain in a diapause (held in stasis without developing) within the egg until more favorable conditions return the following year.

Conservation

This species has numerous conservation challenges to face. Loss of habitat is at the top of the list, with an estimated 1.2 percent loss each year. Human-caused fires, agriculture, firewood exploitation and Madagascar's burgeoning population all play a role in the loss of space necessary for their survival.

Compounding this threat is the impact of illegal harvesting for the pet trade. Their small size and attractive shell makes Spider tortoises extremely popular with exotic pet owners from around the world. Despite the ban in international trade in this species, the animal is still thought to be collected in vast numbers and smuggled out of Madagascar to support the pet trade. The Sacramento Zoo works to educate the public on the impact of the pet trade for many exotic animals, encouraging educated pet choices and the use of reputable breeders that do not remove animals from the wild.



The Sacramento Zoological Society
3930 West Land Park Dr., Sacramento, CA 95822
T: 916-808-5888 F: 916-264-7385 E: info@saczoo.org

www.saczoo.org

Amazing Facts

There are three, geographically separate subspecies of Spider tortoise.

Radiated tortoise lives alongside this tortoise, with Spider tortoises often sharing the much larger Radiated tortoise's burrow.

The Spider tortoise is one of the smallest tortoises in the world.

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