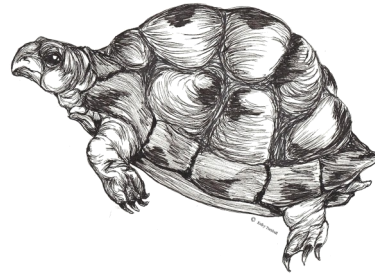


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**Russian Tortoise**  
Also known as  
**Afghan or Steppe Tortoise**  
*Testudo horsfieldi*



**Necessities:**

- Cage
- Bedding
- Heat lamp and bulb
- Uva & Uvb bulb and fixture
- Digital Thermometer

- Hiding spot
- Calcium
- Vitamins

**Extras:**

- Wading Pool
- Toys
- Treats

**General:**

This species of tortoise is found in Pakistan and Russia. One of the smaller species in the tortoise family, they can grow from 5"-7" in length with an average weight of 1-3 pounds and a lifespan of 20 years or more. Although probably one of the duller in appearance, these tortoises have tons of personality! They recognize their caretakers, running towards you, bobbing their heads and standing up so you can give them a good head and chin rub and shell-shine by hand. Since they do not grow very large they are easier to house than many of the other tortoises or turtles. Unfortunately at this time, almost all of the available Russians are wild caught. Hopefully with their gain in popularity more people will have success with breeding them in captivity. They are also less likely to harbor salmonella than most tortoises and turtles as they live in a dry environment and their diet is made up of vegetables and fruits.

**Handling/Exercise:**

Russians don't bite! Unless you wrap your finger in romaine, I have never heard of one ever biting anyone. That said, though, you must pick up your tortoise carefully and hold on tight as they are very strong. Grab it on both sides, firmly, about midway and hold it with the dome of the shell slightly tipped towards you. When excited they do have a tendency to piddle a lot. They do not like being in the air and you should get to your destination quickly.

Tortoises love to graze in a pesticide- and fertilizer-free yard on warm, bright, sunny days. They must be supervised at ALL times. A puppy pen - also known as an 8-Panel Exercise pen - works well for some containment and should be kept half in and half out of the sun with a shelter. Don't forget they burrow! They move very quickly when exposed to real sunlight and tend to blend and/or burrow into their environment well. An inexpensive children's wading pool makes a great playpen for in the house.

Hand sanitizers ARE NOT recommended. Wash with soap and water before and after handling, that is always the best!.

**Housing:**

Although you can use a large fish tank to house your tortoise, building a cage that will accommodate them is preferred for long-term care. It is possible to use large plastic boxes but there is a higher risk of melting and fire and most plastics release toxic fumes when heated. A large wooden box is preferred. They have a tendency to pace around the edges of their cage without realizing the glass is a wall and they will continually bump their heads into it. If you do use a glass cage, covering the outside of at least 3 sides will help lower their frustration. The minimum size can be determined by multiplying the length of the tortoise by eight (bigger is better).

There are many different choices of substrates that can be used, such as Carefresh™ bedding (a recycled paper flake) alfalfa pellets for rabbits (which are also edible), Aspen wood shavings, coconut fiber, potting soil or even newspaper (but the ink gets all over everything). Whichever you use, it is very important to make sure that it stays clean and dry at all times. We have found that they really like the Carefresh™ for burrowing into.

Any caging you use must be cleaned regularly with a 10% bleach solution (1 part bleach and 9 parts water). Rinse thoroughly. Clean all dishes or decorations also. The animal should never be in the enclosure when you are cleaning and you should never use ANY household cleaners!

Outdoor enclosures for summer time should be well built with solid walls and bottom with drainage (do not use chain link or wire) that extend at least one foot underground (Russian tortoises love to burrow and are excellent diggers), protective screen tops to keep out predators and other wildlife, shade cloth to cut down sun exposure and additional shelters (if need be, a heated shelter) inside the pen to get out of the sun and elements.

**Always have working smoke detectors set up close to or in any heated enclosure.**

**Temperature:**

As they come from very arid climates, the climate where you live will determine the housing you need. For example: Western Washington has a very humid climate, consequently a Russian tortoise would not do well outside other than during the dry month of August. On the other hand, Eastern Washington gets much drier during the summer and would allow for longer summer outings. Indoor enclosures are necessary for Washington. Young tortoises should have a basking site temperature of approximately 95° F while the overall enclosure temperature should be approximately in the 80's° F during the day and at night can drop to the mid 70's° F. During the winter, daytime temperatures can be approximately 5° to 10° F lower, but a basking site of approximately 85° to 90° F is needed.

There are many different heating units available. We use infrared ceramic heat emitters (make sure to follow the manufactures guidelines) that do not produce light and are very long-lasting placed at one end of the enclosure to provide a heat gradient so that the tortoise can regulate its own body temperature. All heating units should be attached to an adjustable thermostat. The heating unit(s) should then be placed so that the tortoise cannot injure itself or knock the unit down. By placing thermometers at both the hot end and the warm end, you can double check temperatures easily. We also recommend that a smoke alarm be set up in the enclosure. UVB fluorescent light must be provided for good shell growth and development. These lights should be placed within 12 inches of the top of the tortoise's shell for proper UVB absorption. Reptile Glo® now makes a "Desert 10.0" bulb that works well for tortoises. The lights can be set on a timer so that the tortoise gets approximately 12-14 hours of light during summer months and approximately 10 hours during winter months. Make sure that the room and enclosure have good air circulation and are low in humidity.

Although all turtles and tortoises will generally eat less and be less active during winter months, DO NOT let them try to hibernate. You can raise the temperature a couple of degrees and increase the time your tortoises lights are on. A PROPER hibernation is used for breeding and requires a lot more knowledge on your part, it cannot be done at the room temperatures of your home. It's also mother natures way of culling the weak.

**Diet:**

Russian Tortoises are primarily vegetarians. Excessive amounts of protein and vitamin D3 in their diet is very harmful and will cause improper growth of the scutes (the plates of the shell) and a variety of other very serious health problems. About 80% of a Russian tortoise's diet is greens and grasses with high calcium content such as: kale, collard greens, mustard greens, clover, romaine lettuce, dandelions, beet tops, carrot tops, timothy hay, alfalfa hay and grass clippings (all pesticide- and fertilizer-free). Fruits and vegetables make up approximately 20% of the diet. A mix of the following can be used: carrots, zucchini, yellow squash, green beans, broccoli, figs, apricots, oranges, lemons, tangerines, papaya, pineapple and cantaloupe. All foods should be chopped into bite-sized pieces approximately the size of the head. Generally tortoises get most of their water from their greens but with the introduction of commercial diets it is important that tortoises on these diets or ones that are being supplemented with these diets have water every day that is removed after the tortoise has finished.

**Water:**

A water dish can raise the humidity too high in the cage. It is important to take your tortoise out of its enclosure 2-3 times a week and allow it to soak and drink in ONLY about 1/2 inch of lukewarm water. Tortoises don't swim and they will drown if the water is too deep. This will also help to keep the enclosure cleaner. Young tortoises being fed a primarily fresh diet should be given water every other day and older tortoises a couple of times a week. Any fouled water must be removed immediately. For tortoises kept indoors, the addition of calcium carbonate to their diet is very important and can be sprinkled on their food 3 times a week (approx. 1% of diet by weight) and every 2 weeks with a supplement containing D3 such as Herptivite® or Vionate®. All tortoise dishes and utensils should be kept away from human food preparation areas and be cleaned with a 10% bleach and water solution. For more information we recommend reading: "General Care and Maintenance of Popular Tortoises" by Philippe de Vosjoli.

**Health & Wellbeing:**

It has been illegal to sell turtles and tortoises to the public under 4 inches of size in the US for over 40 years. This a federal law. This law was enacted after a health issue with salmonella due to water turtles being improperly housed in fish bowls. Any animal, reptile, amphibian, dog, cat or fish can harbor the salmonella bacteria. It is very important to always wash your hands before and after handling. DO NOT use hand sanitizers! Soap and water is always the best.

Since almost all of the Russians are wild caught and their diet consists of uncooked vegetables and grazing in the yard, yearly stool samples are a must. Intestinal parasites are difficult to get rid of but very easy for them to pick up.

Also be aware of airborne toxins and fumes such as air fresheners, incense, fumes from household cleaners, neighbors spraying insecticide, fumes from home improvements such as new carpets, paint, glues, wood floor finishes, etc. For these reasons also we do not recommend leaving your tortoise alone for a weekend in a closed-up home. If you purchased your pet from us, we do provide boarding accommodations. Just give us a call! Our favorite veterinarian is Dr. Obegi at Allpet Vet - 206-365-1102.