Desert Tortoise
Gopherus agassizii

By Shu Zheng and Amy Plovnick
Basic Facts

- Native to the Mojave Desert and the Sonoran Desert
- Length of 10 – 14 inches (25 – 36 cm)
- Weigh 8-15 lb (4 – 7 kg) when fully grown
- Life expectancy: 80-100 years
Appearance

- Males slightly larger than females
- High-domed shell in greenish-tan to dark brown color
- Front limbs have heavy, claw-like scales
- Back legs are more stumpy
Habitat

- At least 95% of its life is spent in burrows.
- Two types classified based on habitats: Mojave and Sonoran Desert Tortoises
- Found in Southern California, Southern Nevada, Arizona, and Mexico
- Live on alluvial fans, washes and canyons where soils are suitable for den construction
- Range from near sea level to ~3,500 feet in elevation
- Can live in places where the ground temperature exceeds 140 degrees F
Hibernation

- Hibernate from October through February in underground burrows
- The body temperature is lowered and is close to that of the air temperature in the burrow, about 40° F to 60° F.
- The heart rate, respiration rate and all bodily processes are slowed.
- Burrow provides protection from extreme temperatures and from predators.
Reproduction

- Breeding mainly in late summer and early fall, but can mate any time in the year
- A mature female might lay 4-8 white, hard-shelled eggs in a clutch and produce 2 or 3 clutches in a season
- Only a few hatchlings out of every hundred eggs actually makes it to adulthood
Reproduction

- Nests near the burrow
- After laying, the female leaves the burrow and the soil temperature supports embryo growth
- Incubation period of 90-120 days
- Don’t reach sexual maturity for 15-20 years, when they are 7-8 inches long
Behavior

- Makes hisses, pops, and poinks sounds, maybe as fear and distress calls
- Fighting occurs between males at any time in struggle for dominance
- Because of infrequent rainfall, tortoises dig basins in the soil and remember where they are so that they can return when rain is imminent
Diet

- Herbivore.
- Eat grasses, herbs, annual wildflowers, shrubs new growth of cacti and their fruit and flowers.
- Rocks and soil are ingested to maintain intestinal digestive bacteria.
Predators

- Natural predators: Ravens, gila monsters, kit foxes, badgers, roadrunners, coyotes, and fire ants
- Prey on eggs and juvenile tortoises
- Crows from nearby trash dumps
Threats

- Populations have declined by 90 percent since the 1980s
- Urbanization
- Habitat destruction and fragmentation
- Illegal collection and vandalism by humans.
- Upper respiratory tract disease
- Off-road vehicles
- Grazing
Population Decline

http://www.tortoise-tracks.org/images/demcon2.gif
Protections

- The Mojave population is listed as threatened.
- Unlawful to touch, harm, harass or collect wild desert tortoise
- Captive tortoises can be adopted through Tortoise Adoption Program or the Bureau of Land Management in Nevada
TAP: Want to adopt a tortoise?

- Check the minimum requirements for your yard to pass inspection.
- **Build a pen** or make sure your yard is secured with no possibility for escape. Check that your fence is underground at least 5 inches and that there is no route to escape around a gate, drainage hole, etc. A self-locking gate is desirable to prevent escape.
- **Provide food** for the tortoise in the form of grass or native plants. Irrigation will be necessary, especially for the grass. A roll of sod is often adequate to feed a tortoise, so it is not necessary to have a large grassy area.
- **Build a burrow** following the guidelines on this site. Make sure your burrow is situated so no water can enter the burrow from rainfall, irrigation runoff or drainage. It is best to locate the burrow in a high area of your yard that is shaded in the afternoon.
Want to adopt a tortoise?

- **Cover the burrow** with a minimum of 8 inches of soil on top, sides and back. The soil is essential to provide adequate insulation for the tortoise.

- Review the yard checklist one more time to make sure you are prepared for a **yard inspection**...An inspection will be scheduled and a determination made at that time what size tortoise will be best for your yard.

- If you wish to **adopt a small tortoise** remember to downsize your burrow. Tortoises like cozy burrows.

- If you wish to **adopt hatchings**, a cover over the pen may be necessary to protect them from predators. If you have any questions while preparing your yard, please call and leave a message and a volunteer will return the call to assist you.

Sources