

Leopard Tortoise – *Geochelone pardalis* - Darrell Senneke
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Taxonomic Journey*:

Testudo pardalis BELL 1828

Testudo armata BOIE in GRAY 1831

Testudo biguttata CUVIER 1829

Testudo bipunctata GRAY 1831

Testudo pardalis pardalis - LOVERIDGE 1935

Testudo pardalis babcocki LOVERIDGE 1935

Geochelone pardalis babcocki - AUERBACH 1987: 67

Geochelone pardalis babcocki - BROADLEY & HOWELL 1991: 8

Subspecies:

Geochelone pardalis pardalis (BELL 1828)

Geochelone pardalis babcocki (LOVERIDGE 1935)



This care sheet is intended only to cover the general care of this species. Further research to best develop a maintenance plan for whichever species you are caring for is essential.

Geochelone pardalis, the Leopard tortoise, is one of the species of tortoise most commonly kept as a pet. It is frequently bred which also makes it one of the more commonly available species as captive hatched specimens.

The beautifully contrasting black and yellow colors of the carapace make this a highly attractive tortoise, but beware, this same beautiful pattern can also make it nearly invisible in terrain approximating its home regions of African savannah. It grows to quite a respectable size, with adults reaching 16 - 18 inches (40 - 50 cm) and 40 pounds (18 Kg). There are exceptionally large *G. pardalis* that are over 2 feet (60 cm) and 80 pounds (36 Kg) but these are very rare. Regardless of what the final size may be - this is a big animal and the care of one should not be undertaken unless one is willing to provide the space it requires.

This species exhibits a marked sensitivity to damp, often resulting in respiratory ailments and care must be taken to provide them with a habitat that is uniformly dry either naturally or by artificial means.

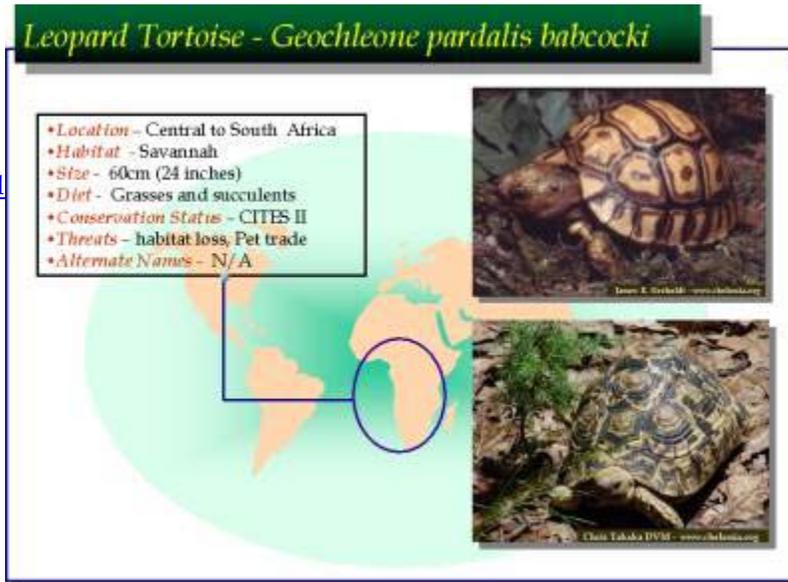
NATURAL HISTORY - Leopard tortoises have a huge range, being found on the savannahs of Africa from the Sudan South to the Cape Province of South Africa. Their diet in the wild consists of grasses, cactus and weeds. In Misty Corton's article on this web site ([Leopard Tortoise](#)) a comprehensive list of their natural foods can be found.

There are, depending on your taxonomist of choice, two subspecies. The one most commonly encountered subspecies is *Geochelone pardalis babcocki*, which occurs over much of its range. The other subspecies, the larger and slightly less domed *Geochelone pardalis pardalis*, is found in the Southern parts of the range. Many taxonomists consider these to be area variants and not worthy of subspecies designation while others hypothesize splitting the two into as many as four or more subspecies. As the care requirements are the same for both designations, for the purpose

of this care sheet they will be referred to as *Geochelone pardalis* or simply the Leopard tortoise.

HOUSING LEOPARD TORTOISES INDOORS -

The most useful form of indoor accommodation for Leopard tortoises consists of a "turtle table". ([How to Build an Indoor Land Turtle Table](#) by David T. Kirkpatrick Ph.D) To all appearances this looks like a bookshelf unit flipped onto its back. A reasonable size for a hatchling is 2 foot by 2 foot, (60 cm by 60 cm). As the animal grows the size of this habitat should be increased. For an adult Leopard tortoise the indoor habitat should be at least 4 foot by 8 foot, (120 cm by 240 cm). Into the bottom of this "turtle table" holes can be cut to allow for the sinking of food, water and eventually nesting containers flush with the surface for easier animal access.



The water dish in the habitat should be large enough to allow the tortoise to soak in it if it wishes, it must also be shallow enough to protect from drowning. For larger tortoises photographic developing trays work well for this purpose. As a substrate in the dry portion of the environment a mixture of topsoil and children's play sand or cypress bark works well, but for this and other arid loving species the substrate of choice for the author is grass hay. Grass hay is easily maintained and provides nourishment if they nibble it. This must be kept dry as Leopard tortoise cannot tolerate wet or constant high humidity conditions. If sand is used in the substrate this area should also not have food placed directly upon it as the sand can build up in the tortoises GI tract leading to possible impaction and even death. A completely separate sand-free area in the habitat should be utilized to feed.

In one corner of the environment a hardware store reflector clip light lamp should be positioned to provide artificial basking facilities. This should be positioned to provide a basking spot of 95 degrees F or so (35 degrees C) in that section of the habitat. The habitat should also be equipped with a full spectrum fluorescent light to provide for UVB. A UVB source is necessary for Vitamin D3 syntheses (needed in calcium metabolism). If preferred to this lighting arrangement a Mercury vapor bulb may be used that fulfills all requirements. There should be a hide box located in the corner away from the basking spot to allow the animal a cooler dim retreat.

OUTDOOR HOUSING - Predator proof outdoor habitats offer many advantages over indoor accommodations and should seriously be considered as an option during warm weather. In particular because of their large size and grazing habits Leopard tortoises should be kept out of doors when the climate allows if at all possible.

DIET - A high fiber, low protein and calcium rich diet will ensure good digestive tract function and smooth growth. *Geochelone pardalis* fed on cat or dog foods frequently die from renal failure or from impacted bladder stones of solidified urates. Avoid over reliance upon

'supermarket' greens and fruits, which typically contain inadequate fiber levels, excessive pesticide residues and are too rich in sugar and should be avoided. Leopard tortoises are a grazing species; every effort should be made to duplicate this diet in captivity. Fruit should be offered very rarely or not at all.



Diet:

- Orchard grass or hay
- Timothy or Bermuda Grass
- Leafy greens (dandelions, clover, endive, grape leaves, mulberry leaves etc.)
- Cactus pads

Additional calcium supplementation is essential. Powdered calcium can be sprinkled all foods. It is suggested that one use calcium supplemented with vitamin D3 if the animal is being maintained indoors

and calcium without D3 if it is outdoors. Provision of a cuttlefish bone, which can be gnawed if desired, is also recommended.

This species does not hibernate in nature. Facilities should be provided for the continued health and well being of the tortoise, regardless of its size, indoors in cooler climates during the winter.

It should be noted that turtle and tortoise care research is ongoing. As new information becomes available we share this on the World Chelonian Trust web site at www.chelonia.org. Serious keepers find it to be a benefit to have the support of others who keep these species. Care is discussed in our free online email community, which may be joined from the web address above. Please contact us about the many benefits of becoming a member of the World Chelonian Trust.

(Updated 03-27-2003)

References:

The EMBL Reptile Database <http://www.embl-heidelberg.de/~uetz/LivingReptiles.html>

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