African Spurred Tortoise Care Sheet

Scientific Name: Geochelone sulcata

Common Name: African Spurred Tortoise

Where are they found? Northern Africa: Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, The Sudan, Ethiopia.

Natural Habitat: Hottest, driest regions of the desert.

Description: They are the largest African Tortoise. Broad, flat carapace. They have thick skin to hold water. Growth rings are obvious. Adult males have reverted marginal scales in the front. They have spurs (like claws) on the legs. Males are a little bigger as adults. Females have a slightly flatter carapace and males have slightly concave plastrons.

Vocalization: Hiss when frightened.

Size: 24-31: (61-75cm), largest 41.6” Hatchlings are 11/2-2” and oval shaped.

Weight: Adults 80-160 lbs. Largest 232 lbs! Don’t let their size fool you, hatchlings weigh less than an ounce (20-25 gm).

Life Expectancy: Oldest spurred tortoise in captivity is 54 yrs.
Color: Brownish, gray or yellowish. Skin color matches shell. Tortoise color camouflages easily in the desert or savannah. Hatchlings are brown/yellow with brown borders on scutes.

Diet in the wild: Grasses and other plants.

Predators/Enemies: Humans, loss of habitat.

Do they make good pets? They are interesting and personable, but need a huge amount of space and food.

Housing: Because of their ability to dig, if you keep this tortoise outside you need to take extra precautions to keep the tortoise from escaping his enclosure. Keep the top covered if possible to keep predators away (especially important with smaller tortoises). Need a huge amount of space. Males can be very aggressive when housed together. Hatchlings can be kept in a large aquarium (40 gallon would be nice) with a substrate they can eat.

Temperature: Daytime 85-105°F, Night 70 °s F. Give a variety of temperatures within the enclosure to give the tortoise the option of where he wants to be.

Humidity: Must be kept dry, however it is recommended to soak hatchlings in very shallow water for about a half hour 2-3X a week.

Lighting: Full spectrum light. Basking are with incandescent light about 105 °F. Give unfiltered natural sunlight whenever possible. Always provide shade.

Furniture: Very shallow water bowl larger than the tortoise for soaking. They do not swim to keep it shallow, never as high as where the carapace and plastron meet.

Substrate: mounts of alfalfa hay or CLEAN cut grass and leaves should be available for digging. If you keep them outdoors, make sure grass is not treated with chemicals. They love to eat the grass, dandelions, mulberry leaves and clover.

Diet: Clean grass cuttings, clover, dandelion greens and flowers, rose petals, nasturtium, hibiscus, geraniums, cactus fruits, desert mallow, mustard greens, collard greens, turnip greens, mulberry leaves. They like bright colors so give them something colorful every day such a shredded yams or carrots. Can feed small amounts of fresh fruits. They will sometimes eat their own feces. Hatchlings will eat more dark greens such as collards, alfalfa, kale. Too much protein will make them
sick or even kill them. Do not feed too much broccoli, kale, bok choy, or Brussels sprouts.

**How Often:** These tortoises will eat for hours on a daily basis.

**Breeding in captivity?** Yes.

**Mating rituals in the wild:** Mate June-March, usually September-November. Females will eat more after mating for a couple weeks before laying eggs. Females will dig several spots before she finds a good spot for the eggs. Sometimes she will urinate in the hole before she lays the eggs. The hole is about 2ft. wide and 3-6 inches deep, then a deeper spot 8 inches. It takes several hours to dig the hole (at temps about 78 ºF) and they lay 15-30 eggs. The eggs hatch in about 8 months.

**What preparations need to be made in captivity?** Incubate the eggs in vermiculite/water 1:1-2 in closed container at 82-84 º F. Born with yolk sack. Put hatchlings on damp paper towels at 84 ºF until yolk is absorbed. Keeping hatchlings hydrated is very important to keeping them alive. Can soak them in shallow luke warm water for about 15 min. every other day. It also stimulates them to defecate.

**Fun Facts:**

- Always wash your hands after handling any reptile.
- In the wild, where water is in short supply, they will hold water in until they get a drink and will often urinate while drinking.
- Will dig burrows to create moisture and to cool themselves. They can be up to 10ft. deep.
- If temperature gets over 100 ºF they will salivate and smear it on their legs to keep cool.
- Can be in serious trouble if they fall onto their backs. Especially if it is extremely warm.
- Beware of pesticides if your tortoise grazes in your yard. Also plastic, glass, metal and other pieces of trash can look like food to a tortoise. They will try to eat just about anything. Beware of toxic plants.
- Some common problems: shell pyramiding (the scutes on the carapace get high, sloped like a pyramid) from too much protein. Shell can get soft from calcium deficiency (you should add calcium powder to their food 2X per week). Respiratory infections (runny
nose and eyes, loss of appetite, laziness), they respond to antibiotics. Annual fecals, especially for animals kept outdoors, are a must to check for parasites.

- Ram into each other when showing aggressiveness. Start right after hatching.
- These tortoises grow very quickly. Be prepared to give them lots of room to roam.
- Chain link fencing for a tortoise pen is a bad idea. The tortoises can get their heads stuck in the fence. The fence must be sturdy because a *sulcata* can easily push through chain link. The fence should also go into the ground because these tortoises are such good diggers. You should also have wood or aluminum at the base around the perimeter.
- These tortoises DO NOT hibernate in the wild and should never be kept in cold conditions. A night time drop with a warmer day is okay, but no lower than 50 °F.