

Tortoise



A tortoise is a terrestrial turtle belonging to the Testudinidae family, Testudines order, and Cryptodira suborder. They are one of the longest living animals in the world.

Background

- Tortoise is the word referred to slow, terrestrial turtles. This was determined by the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists.
- Tortoises and turtles have existed since 300 million years ago.
- They inhabit places with a semi-arid climate.

Physical Characteristics

- A tortoise's shell is not a single shell, but rather a composition of 60 bony plates.
- The top part is called a carapace and the underside is called a plastron.
- Both sides are joined by a bridge.
- The top carapace has scales on it called scutes.
- Scutes protect the shell plates from getting injured.



Tortoise

- Tortoises can hide their head, feet, and tail in their shell.
- A tortoise has a collarbone, ribs, and a spine inside its shell.
- Their shells are very sensitive.
- Tortoises are able to feel anything that touches their shells, even if you touch it very softly.
- You can tell the age of a tortoise by the rings around its scutes.
- The color of a tortoise's shell is telling to its place of origin.
- Tortoises with light-colored shells come from warmer places.
- The sulcata, for instance, has a light tan shell and it comes from the Sahara Desert.
- Tortoises have no teeth so they chew their food using ridges in their tough mouths.
- Tortoises have no ears, but they have two tiny holes on the sides of their heads.
- On the roof of their mouths is what is called the Jacobson's organ.
- The Jacobson's organ is a vomeronasal organ that allows tortoises to have a sharp sense of smell.
- Tortoises can smell even the faintest of scents.
- They circulate air that passes through their nose by pumping their throats.
- Tortoises are sensitive to bright colors.
- A tortoise's feet can draw heat from the ground.



A giant tortoise's foot



Tortoise

Other Characteristics

- Although tortoises can't swim, they can hold their breath underwater for long periods of time because they're able to tolerate carbon dioxide.
- Tortoises are cold-blooded and get warmth from their environment. This is why they like sunbathing.
- Tortoises are diurnal, meaning they're active in the day and asleep at night.
- Tortoises are mostly herbivorous.
- Not all turtles are tortoises.
- Tortoises are mainly terrestrial while turtles are mostly water-dwelling.
- The main physical difference of turtles and tortoises are their feet and shells.
- Tortoises have short, thick feet like those of an elephant's while turtles have webbed feet for swimming.
- A tortoise's shell is heavier and more rounded while a turtle's shell is lighter and flat.
- Tortoises are often loners.
- Tortoises are experts at getting all the water and nutrients they need from what they eat.
- Their hindgut system separates water from waste, which is handy when water is scarce and they need to rely on water from their waste.
- A tortoise's sex can only be seen when it reaches a certain size.
- However, there are other ways to tell if a tortoise is male or female: by their shells and by their tails.
- Females generally have flatter plastrons and males tend to have longer tails.
- Females can lay eggs even without a male partner to fertilize them.



Tortoise

Species

- The largest tortoise species is the Galapagos tortoise which can weigh up to 440 pounds and grow up to 1.2 meters long.
- The Aldabra giant tortoise, found in the Aldabra atoll in Seychelles, is one of the largest tortoises in the world.
- The African spurred tortoise, also known as the sulcata, is the third largest tortoise and one of the most popular to have as a pet.
- The sulcata is found in the Sahara desert and weighs up to 200 pounds and lives for up to 100 years.
- The red-footed tortoise and the yellow-footed tortoise from South America are often kept as pets.
- The Indian star tortoise is an endangered species from India and Sri Lanka.
- The pancake tortoise is the species with a flattened shell and is native to Kenya and Tanzania.

Other Facts

- A group of tortoises is known as a creep.
- The lifespan of a tortoise ranges from 90 to 250 years.
- Most tortoises hibernate in the winter.
- Tortoises hide in their shells when they're startled.



Galapagos tortoise



African spurred tortoise



Tortoise

- Tortoises exhibit sexual dimorphism, meaning males and females are distinctly different from each other in terms of appearance.
- Females are typically larger in size than males.
- Female tortoises lay up to 30 eggs at a time.
- Females leave their eggs in deep burrows that they dig and let the eggs incubate for 90 to 120 days.
- Males try to get the attention of females for mating by ramming their shells.
- Females can store a male's sperm for up to three or four years until they use it to fertilize their eggs.
- It is not only the tortoise's shell that is affected by temperature but also the tortoise's sex.
- In warmer climates, there are more female offspring.

Tortoise Trivia

- The tortoise is the symbol of the Greek god Hermes.
- Charles Darwin once had a pet Galapagos tortoise named Harriet.
- Harriet ended up in the zoo founded by the parents of Steve Irwin, the famed Crocodile Hunter.
- In 1968, the Soviet Union launched a spacecraft with tortoises on board. It went around the Earth and safely returned back.
- Sailors used to eat the meat of tortoises they captured in the Galapagos Islands.
- The Galapagos Islands were named after the Galapagos tortoises by the Spanish who found the islands in 1535.
- The ancient Roman military made use of a formation inspired by tortoises, which is called the testudo formation.
- Testudo is the Latin word for tortoise.
- The testudo formation would require soldiers to line up in rows with their shields held in front of or above them. The shields would then look like a shell that covered the whole unit.
- Objects can be called testudinal if they are shaped like or are reminiscent of a tortoise shell.



Name: _____

Tortoise Basics



What are the basic facts we need to remember about tortoises? Fill in the blanks to complete the most important tortoise facts!

A tortoise is a _____ turtle belonging to the Testudinidae family under the order of _____.

They have existed since _____ years ago.

They are one of the _____ animals in the world.

They live in places with a _____ climate.

They live on _____ and not water.



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They live on land and not water.



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