

RUSSIAN TORTOISE CARE GUIDE

Testudo (Agrionemys) horsfieldii

Bay Area Bird & Exotics Hospital

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Russian tortoises are hardy, food-motivated, and absurdly long-lived — 40 to 60+ years, so this is a will-it-to-your-grandkids level commitment. Native to the dry steppes of Central Asia, they spend part of the year hibernating just to avoid the heat, the cold, and possibly your opinions.



HOUSING & ENCLOSURE

- Minimum enclosure: **5×5 ft (1.5×1.5 m)** for one or two adults - tortoises do not do studio apartments.
- Hatchlings can start in a 75-gallon aquarium, but budget for a bigger box — they will outgrow whatever you were hoping would be the last upgrade.
- Glass enclosures look pretty and allow you to see your tortoise but many of these guys will try to head butt their way out! Large plastic totes are a great (and significantly cheaper) option. Don't stress your reptile unnecessarily.
- Custom tortoise tables (wood, Plexiglas, or livestock trough) work well - roughly **4×4 ft, 8–12 in deep**.
- Only house compatible individuals - **never mix with other reptile species**, and group housing still needs supervision.
- **Provide two hide boxes** (one warm side, one cool side) - even a homebody needs an address on each side of town.
- Safe substrate: **cypress mulch, coconut fiber, shredded aspen, newspaper**. A plain-soil "dig box" satisfies their burrowing instinct - keep it clean and just-clumpable.
- **Never use** loose sand, gravel, or walnut shell as the main substrate - impaction is a real and preventable emergency.
- Outdoor housing is fine if it's predator-proof and can't flood - a soggy tortoise is not a happy tortoise.
- Add rocks, driftwood, and pesticide-free plants for enrichment - bare enclosures bore even the slowest reptile alive.



TEMPERATURE, HUMIDITY & LIGHTING

Zone	Temperature
Warm side / basking	85–95°F (30–35°C)
Cool side	70–80°F (21–27°C)
Nighttime	Not below 60–70°F (16–21°C)

- Heat sources (basking bulb, under-tank heater, heat cable/tape) all need a **thermostat** — and must be mounted outside the enclosure. Inside, despite what the box claims, means burns.
- Humidity: **30–50%** (closer to 50% for juveniles); mist as needed and keep a moist dig box for a natural burrow-humidity boost.
- UVB lighting: **12–14 hours daily**, 5.0 bulb, no more than 18–20 in overhead, no closer than 12 in. Replace every 6 months if you're not measuring output.
- **No colored night bulbs** — tortoises can see color, and mood lighting will not make them like you more.



DIET & FEEDING

- **Shrubs, weeds and edible forbs** (broad-leaved, wild herbaceous plants such as minor's lettuce, dandelion and stinging nettle) available at all times — these are grazers, not occasional snackers.
- **Dark leafy greens and prickly pear cactus pads** every 2–3 days for adults, daily for juveniles — escarole, endive, romaine, dandelion, turnip and mustard greens are all good.
- **No fruit, ever** — it's not a reward, it's a bloat risk in a body plan that never evolved to expect it.
- **Flowers** (hibiscus, hosta, rose, mulberry leaf) make excellent hand-fed treats — and yes, they will remember you have them.
- These tortoises are crepuscular — feed in the early morning. Brunch is not in their vocabulary.
- Commercial pellets/diets can supplement, but should never be the main course.



SUPPLEMENTS

Supplement	Frequency
Plain calcium carbonate (no D3, no phosphorus)	Every time fresh food is offered
Reptile multivitamin	Once every 2 weeks



ROUTINE VETERINARY CARE & HIBERNATION

- New tortoises should see an experienced exotics vet **shortly after purchase** — not “eventually,” shortly — including a fresh fecal exam.
- Quarantine new arrivals **at least 90 days** away from other reptiles.
- **Annual wellness exams** catch problems long before your tortoise decides to tell you about them (it won't).
- Hibernation is natural for this species, but **only under veterinary guidance** — hibernating a sick tortoise can be fatal, full stop.



IMPORTANT ZONOTIC INFORMATION

Most reptiles, including Russian tortoises, can carry Salmonella bacteria without appearing ill. Always wash your hands thoroughly after handling your tortoise or anything from its enclosure. Russian tortoises are not recommended for very young children or individuals with compromised immune systems.

Questions? We've heard weirder ones. Call us.

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