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# Desert Tortoise

(*Gopherus agassizii*)

**Class:** *Reptilia*

**Order:** *Testudines*

**Family:** *Testudinidae*

**Characteristics:** Desert tortoises have a short tail, flat front legs, elephant-like back legs, and a high-domed shell. An adult desert tortoise can weigh up to 15 pounds with a shell up to 15 inches long.

**Behavior:** The desert tortoise digs a burrow where they can spend up to 95% of its life underground taking refuge from extreme hot and cold. They are most active from March to June and September to October.

**Reproduction:** A desert tortoise can take 13 to 20 years to become reach sexual maturity. They also have low reproductive rates but have a long period of time during which they are reproductively available. When they do reproduce they lay anywhere from 3-14 eggs per clutch and the young suffer a high mortality rate of about 99%. Babies show slow growth (~2.5 cm / year) and soft/flexible shells making them particularly vulnerable to predators.

## **Diet:**

Wild: herbs, grasses, cacti, and wildflowers

Zoo: Romaine lettuce, tortoise pellets, and hay

**Threats/Conservation:** All desert tortoise subspecies are facing major threats right now. Off-road vehicles damage plant life which impacts the availability of food and water for the tortoises. They can also run over a burrow and accidentally kill the tortoise inside. Housing developments and solar energy projects displace tortoises from their habitat. They are also facing increase predation from ravens and feral dogs. Habitat fragmentation by roads makes it more difficult for individuals to find each other for the purposes of mating and they get hit by cars while crossing. First Solar Switch Station 1 was one of the first solar energy facilities to show concern for the environmental impacts of the project. A portion of their proceeds go to the preservation and restoration of desert tortoise habitat in Southern Nevada. Many other groups have joined together in an effort to save desert tortoises by preserving the regions they call home.

**FYI:** Desert tortoises may dig shallow basins in impermeable soil to catch rainwater. However, most of their water is ingested via the plants they eat and then they store it in their bladders. You should never pick up a desert tortoise off the road as it could cause them to dump their water supply.



## **Range & Habitat:**

Desert shrublands in southern California, Nevada, and Utah. As well as western Arizona and the Sonoran Desert.



**Lifespan:** up to 80+ years in captivity, 40 years in the wild.

**Special Adaptations:** Can fully retract into their shells to protect themselves from predators. Slightly flattened front legs help them dig burrows in the sand.

**IUCN Conservation Status:**  
Critically Endangered

