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Russian Tortoise Care Sheet

General Information: *Testudo horsfieldii* is known variously as the Russian, the Afghan, the Steppe, and the Horsfield's tortoise. This tortoise is found primarily in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, southeastern Russia, and China. Its native environment is harsh and arid, and includes sandy steppes, as well as grassy areas close to springs in arid, rocky, hilly terrain. It is found at elevations as high as 5,000 to 7,000 feet. This tortoise has the northernmost range of any known tortoise.

T. horsfieldii is a great digger and hibernates in deep burrows during the winter, and in the southern parts of its range it aestivates (experiences a dormant period) during the summer. In its native environment, this tortoise is active for only about three months of the year, typically March, April and May.

Description: Russian tortoises averages five to eight inches long with a rather flat, roundish, yellow-green or olive carapace (top of the shell). Males are usually smaller than the females and are most easily sexed by the male's tail, which is longer and thicker than the female's (when withdrawn in its shell, the male's tail will lie against its thigh). The plastron (underside of the shell) in both males and females is usually blotched with black or may be black all over.

Captive Environment: These are a hardy species, but do have some specific needs. Russian tortoises requires a very dry, well-drained cage in an indoor enclosure. The enclosure should have appropriate landscaping, with area for hiding, active motion and an easily cleaned substrate.

Provide fresh water on a daily basis. The bowl(s) should be sunk into the ground and shallow enough for a tortoise to climb in and out of. The water should only just cover the lowest edge of the carapace. These tortoises cannot swim and can drown in water that goes over their head. Suggestion: Buy a large diameter plastic flowerpot saucer from your local nursery. Sink it into the ground of their enclosure so the lip is even with the surrounding soil. It's easy to clean and fill.

The appropriate temperature range is 80 – 85 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and 70-75 degrees Fahrenheit at night. An appropriate heat source at night is a ceramic heat emitter. Red heat lamps should not be used.

Feeding: The tortoise's natural diet consists of herbaceous and succulent vegetation including grasses, twigs, flowers and some fruits. These tortoises DO NOT EAT ANIMAL PROTEIN! The best diet is one that comes as close as possible to their natural diet. Ideally, the tortoise should graze on edible plants in its enclosure. However, you will find that they will eat many

plants down to the roots and that's the end of the plant. One way around this is to grow edible plants outside the enclosure, in a totally pesticide-free environment, and give these to the tortoise. Provide a varied assortment.

Also, lightly sprinkle their food with calcium carbonate to provide a good source of calcium needed to help prevent bone problems. The following are some of the best weeds, grasses, and flowers for a healthy tortoise:

Clovers	Grasses (Common Bermuda, Timothy, Rye, Fescue, Bluegrass)	
Coreopsis	Hibiscus	Daisy
Honeysuckle	Dandelion	Mallows
Endive	Nasturtium	Escarole
Opuntia cacti	Gazania	Petunias
Geranium	Roses	Sedums
Grape leaves (not grape ivy!)		

Just be careful not to overfeed *T. horsfieldii*, as they tend to be overweight in captivity. If they are starting to look chubby when they pull back into their shells, cut back a little on the amount you are feeding.

Common Ailments: Tortoises are especially susceptible to respiratory ailments. Some of the signs to watch for are runny nose, labored breathing/gasping, loss of appetite, and decreased activity. Respiratory diseases in Russian tortoises can be caused by bacterial, fungal, or parasitic infections. This species is also susceptible to viral pneumonias, and must be treated immediately should they show symptoms. Vitamin deficiencies are also a common cause of respiratory disease in all chelonians.

Calcium deficiency is a major problem, which can cause soft shells, shell and bone deformities, kidney damage, and possibly death. This condition can be partially prevented with a high quality diet (as recommended above), supplemented with calcium carbonate lightly sprinkled on their food.

Along with calcium, it is imperative that all Russian tortoises receive about 10-12 hours of high-quality, high intensity UV light per day. This is very important for normal metabolism, required for calcium absorption, and necessary for immune system strength. If you use a fluorescent bulb ("strip" or "coil" light), get the highest output bulb you can find (8.0 or 10.0) and replace every 4 months. Alternatively, use a mercury vapor bulb, which can last up to 2 years with good care and have higher output.

Sunken eyes indicate dehydration, which can lead to kidney failure and death. If dehydration is suspected, immediately soak the tortoise in barely lukewarm water covering the edge of the carapace for 30 minutes or so. Soaking tortoises once or twice a week is a good way to keep them properly hydrated. Dehydration can easily be caused by chronic, systemic infections, especially respiratory infections.

Internal parasites are common in tortoises, and they should be dewormed on an annual basis or as recommended by your vet. (It's a good idea to wash your hands immediately after handling a tortoise, or any reptile, though most tortoise pathogens are not transmissible to humans.)