

## Indian Star Tortoise Care Sheet

### Care sheet for the Indian star tortoise (*Geochelone elegans*).

By Jerry D. Fife

Click image to enlarge

Star Tortoise Female. Photo by Jerry D. Fife, [www.FifeReptiles.com](http://www.FifeReptiles.com).

Star Tortoise Male. Photo by Jerry D. Fife, [www.FifeReptiles.com](http://www.FifeReptiles.com).

Star Tortoise Hatchling. Photo by Jerry D. Fife, [www.FifeReptiles.com](http://www.FifeReptiles.com).

Star Tortoise Juvenile. Photo by Jerry D. Fife, [www.FifeReptiles.com](http://www.FifeReptiles.com). Indian Star Tortoise (*Geochelone elegans*)

Indian star tortoises are popular based on their size, personality and appearance. Their care is similar to the leopard tortoise. With yellow lines radiating from the center of each scute and contrasting with their black base color, star tortoises are one of the world's most attractive tortoise species. They also are not territorial. Multiple males and females may be kept together without the fighting, aggressive biting and ramming encountered during breeding by the European species.

Indian star tortoises are native to India, Sri Lanka and southeastern Pakistan. Although there are no formally recognized subspecies, there are geographically separate variants. In the United States herpkeepers typically identify Indian and Sri Lankan star tortoises, but both are classified as *Geochelone elegans*.

#### Indian Star Tortoise Availability

Only captive-bred star tortoises are available because they are protected throughout their natural range. There is no legal export of wild-caught specimens.

#### Indian Star Tortoise Size

Females grow larger than males. Females typically attain a length of about 7 or 8 inches, and males typically only reach 5 or 6 inches in length. Specimens from Sri Lanka and northwest India grow larger. Sri Lankan females may grow to 15 inches long, but males only reach 8 or 9 inches long.

#### Indian Star Tortoise Life Span

Reports range from 30 to 80 years. Captive star tortoises under proper care may live longer than wild tortoises, which might experience droughts, fires and predators.

#### Indian Star Tortoise Caging

The preferred setup for adult star tortoises is outdoors. However, if you live in a climate too cold for the tortoises, you may house them indoors. The size of the tortoise also plays a role in its caging. Hatchlings are raised almost exclusively inside. This protects the tortoises from predators and allows better monitoring of food intake and temperature control.

A pen 6 feet long by 6 feet wide is sufficient for one to four tortoises. The walls should be about a foot high and made of block or wood, so the tortoises cannot see through or over them. Star tortoises do not dig, so the walls do not need to be buried. However, sinking the walls into the ground helps to prevent rodents or other animals from burrowing under them. An outdoor enclosure should have a hide box and a variety of shrubs, grasses or bushes to provide protection from the elements and a sense of security. A portion of the pen may be planted with grass or alfalfa for the tortoises to eat. Some rolling terrain is recommended. Tortoises often bask on slopes to maximize sun exposure or dig into them to lay eggs. Bare ground is also required for breeding animals because female tortoises dig in the dirt to lay eggs.

Indoors, adult star tortoises can be permanently housed in a stock tank, plastic pool or large tub. Although a pair of adult star tortoises could be maintained in an enclosure 3 feet long by 2 feet wide, larger enclosures allow you to go longer between cleaning and changing substrates. A clean environment is critical to maintaining a healthy tortoise. Grass clippings, peat moss or potting soil work well as a substrate for permanent indoor enclosures. If a tortoise is only housed indoors at night or during a brief winter period, newspaper works well as a substrate. An indoor enclosure should include different microclimates, including a warm, moist hide box and dry area with a basking light.

#### Indian Star Tortoise Lighting and Temperature

The optimal temperature for star tortoises is between 80 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit. They can handle temperatures around 40 degrees for brief periods, but when nighttime temperatures drop into the 50s or high temperatures fail to exceed 70 degrees, the tortoises should be moved indoors or provided with heat. In wet conditions or high humidity,

temperatures should stay above 75 degrees. The combination of cold and wet can be deadly to your tortoise and must be avoided. Moisture levels should be low when the temperature is low, and moisture levels may rise when temperatures are high. High dry temperatures are also acceptable and in fact are provided most of the summer. Star tortoises don't hibernate, and they cannot survive freezing temperatures.

If star tortoises are maintained entirely indoors, temperatures may range from 75 to 90 degrees.

Exposure to natural sunlight or ultraviolet light plays an important role in how a star tortoise absorbs and uses calcium. UVB light or natural sunlight helps the tortoise produce vitamin D3, which helps the tortoise absorb and use the available calcium. Basking in natural, unfiltered sunlight is the best method to ensure sufficient D3 is available for calcium absorption. It is recommended that tortoises have a calcium-rich diet with a calcium-to-phosphorus ratio of 2-1. Some tortoisekeepers supplement the diet with manufactured vitamins and D3, but I have not found this to be necessary if the tortoises are provided a varied diet and exposure to UVB light.

Indoors, UVB can be obtained from fluorescent tubes specially made for use by reptiles or from mercury vapor bulbs, which also provide some heat. If fluorescent tubes are used for UVB, a separate lamp may be required for heat, so the tortoise can thermoregulate and raise its temperature to optimal levels for digestion. This heat source should provide a basking area of about 95 degrees.

#### Indian Star Tortoise Food

Star tortoises graze and feed on a variety of grasses and vegetation. They require a high-fiber diet rich in calcium. Their captive diet may include grasses, greens, vegetables, fruit, and prepackaged or commercial diets.

Grasses may include but aren't limited to Bermuda grass, rye, mature alfalfa (not sprouts), blue grass and fescue. Greens may include but aren't limited to collard greens, turnip greens, mustard greens, dandelion greens and flowers, hibiscus leaves and flowers, grape leaves, escarole, and mulberry tree leaves. Vegetables may include but aren't limited to spineless cactus pads (*Opuntia* species), carrots, zucchini, butternut squash, pumpkin, snap or snow peas, mushrooms, sweet potato, yellow squash and bell peppers.

A small portion of their diet may include fruits, such as tomatoes, apples, papayas, cantaloupes, honeydews, watermelons, strawberries, raspberries, grapes, mangos and bananas.

#### Indian Star Tortoise Water

Star tortoises readily drink standing water, so provide a water dish, but check it daily, and clean it as required. Hatchlings may be soaked once or twice a week in shallow, warm water. They will drink and often defecate or pass urate waste, which has a white pastelike appearance.

#### Indian Star Tortoise Health

Star tortoises are prone to respiratory problems, which occur when a tortoise is cold or is kept in suboptimal conditions. Signs of a respiratory problem include labored breathing, a nasal discharge, a gaping mouth, puffy eyes, lethargy and a loss of appetite. If not corrected, minor problems can progress to more serious conditions, such as pneumonia.

To correct minor respiratory problems, increase the warmth of the enclosure with an extra heat source, such as a fixture with an incandescent bulb or a heating pad under the enclosure. Bump up the temperature, and increase the hotspot 5 to 10 degrees. The added heat will help boost a tortoise's immune system and allow it to better fight infection. Keep the enclosure hot and dry. Soak the tortoise to keep it well hydrated, and ensure water is available to drink.

Severe cases, or tortoises that do not respond to added heat, will typically require a course of antibiotic drugs prescribed by a veterinarian.

#### Indian Star Tortoise Handling and Temperament

Not a good pet for young children, tortoises should be handled infrequently. Some star tortoises are shy. They will withdraw their head and limbs, but they will generally learn to recognize their keeper and will come for food.

To learn more about Star Tortoises or purchase Jerry Fife's book *Star Tortoises*, please visit his website at: [FifeReptiles.com](http://FifeReptiles.com).