Russian Tortoise Care Guide

15-page illustrated guide | Enclosure, digging, UVB, diet, soaking, health and long-term planning



A Russian tortoise needs a broad secure floor area, a measured heat and UVB gradient, safe digging space, a varied herbivorous diet, clean water, and a lifetime care plan.

A practical, species-specific overview for responsible ownership in the United States. Use this guide alongside an experienced reptile veterinarian and current local rules.

01 | Species, lifespan and commitment

The Russian tortoise (Testudo horsfieldii), also called Horsfield’s or Central Asian tortoise, is a small, active, burrowing land tortoise from Central Asia. It needs a broad floor area, safe digging opportunities, bright daytime light, UVB, basking heat, and a high-fiber plant diet.

Adults are often about 5-10 inches long. Lifespan can reach 40-60+ years with good care, so plan for decades. Small size does not mean small habitat: tortoises walk and dig over large areas and can escape by climbing or burrowing.

• Indoor owners need a roomy open-top tortoise table or custom enclosure, not a small glass aquarium.

• Outdoor housing can provide natural sun and foraging only when weather, shade, fences, predators, toxic plants, and escape routes are carefully controlled.

• Do not buy an animal without exact source, legal status, and a reptile veterinarian.

Russian tortoises are a major long-term commitment. Prepare the adult habitat and find an experienced reptile veterinarian before adoption.

02 | Choosing a tortoise and legal sourcing

Ask whether the animal is captive-bred, rescued, or imported; request age estimate, weight history, diet, prior veterinary records, parasite testing, current temperatures and UVB details. Many Russian tortoises in trade may be wild-caught or imported, so origin and legal documentation deserve careful attention.

Look for alert behavior, clear eyes and nostrils, an intact firm shell, normal walking, and no obvious wounds, discharge, swelling, or labored breathing. A new tortoise should receive a reptile-veterinary exam and fecal testing even if it appears healthy.

Confirm current federal, state, and local wildlife rules before acquiring or transporting the tortoise. Keep seller, transfer, and veterinary documents. Requirements can vary, especially for imported or protected animals.

Never release a pet outdoors. Rehoming through an experienced tortoise rescue or veterinarian is safer for the animal and local wildlife.

Do not purchase based on a claim that a tortoise is “easy” or requires only a small box. Ask for records and see the animal’s current setup.

03 | Indoor enclosure: floor space and security

Provide the largest practical enclosure with a broad footprint. Basic commercial recommendations vary, but a 4 ft x 2 ft enclosure is often cited as a minimum starting point for one adult; specialist keepers recommend substantially larger floor area, such as 8 ft x 4 ft, when feasible. Bigger is better, especially for active males.

Choose a tortoise table, large stock tub, or custom enclosure with solid walls high enough to deter climbing and a secure barrier around heat and electrical equipment. Clear sides may encourage pacing; opaque lower walls can help reduce glass surfing.

Offer a warm basking zone, cooler retreat, multiple hides, safe rocks or flat tiles, edible plants, and deep enough substrate for digging. Place heavy items so burrowing cannot undermine them.

If outdoors, build a secure pen with walls that extend above ground and a buried apron or barrier below ground. Provide shade, shelter, a dry retreat, drinking water, and protection from predators and weather.

Plan the layout around walking, turning, digging, and choosing between warm, cool, shaded, and humid areas.

04 | Substrate, burrows and humidity

Russian tortoises dig and use burrows to shelter from temperature extremes. Use a safe, compactable substrate that permits natural digging and is not dusty, sharp, or easy to swallow in large amounts. Avoid cedar and aromatic woods, gravel, walnut shell, and loose sand-heavy mixes.

Maintain a drier general environment while providing a slightly humid burrow or hide, especially for juveniles. Exact humidity guidance differs across care sources and climates. Measure conditions at tortoise level and ask a veterinarian to assess the enclosure rather than misting everything indiscriminately.

Keep the substrate clean and replace damp or moldy patches. Provide enough ventilation to prevent stagnant air, while avoiding constant drafts and severe drying.

A dry-looking shell does not tell the whole story about hydration or humidity. Track weight, appetite, urates and feces, skin, and shell growth over time.

A humid hide can support hydration, but wet bedding across the whole enclosure can create health problems. Adjust moisture to measured conditions.

05 | Heat gradient and safe basking

Create a gradient so the tortoise can warm itself and move away. Many care sheets use a basking surface around 95-100°F (35-38°C), a warm area around 80-85°F (27-29°C), and a cooler area around 70-75°F (21-24°C). Exact readings depend on setup and measuring method.

Use overhead basking heat secured above the enclosure. Measure the basking surface with an infrared thermometer and use digital probes at warm and cool zones. A lamp guard prevents contact burns; keep the animal away from hot bulbs and cords.

Avoid heat rocks and unregulated heat pads. Do not use colored night bulbs as routine lighting. Healthy indoor animals generally need darkness at night, with safe supplemental non-light heat only if room conditions require it and a veterinarian approves.

Check temperatures after seasonal room changes, lamp replacement, and substrate adjustments. Do not rely on the thermostat dial or hand-feel.

The tortoise must be able to move into shade and cooler air. If it cannot escape a hot spot, the heat source is unsafe.

06 | UVB and daytime light

Indoor Russian tortoises need appropriate UVB exposure to support calcium metabolism and normal shell and bone health. Use a reputable reptile UVB lamp, reflector, and measured distance based on manufacturer guidance and enclosure mesh. A linear lamp generally creates a useful UVB zone across part of the habitat.

UVB cannot pass effectively through ordinary glass or plastic. Provide a gradient: a basking area with UVB and a shaded retreat. If available, use a UV index meter or have an experienced reptile vet help verify placement.

Use a consistent daytime cycle, often about 10-14 hours depending on season and the animal’s plan. Record lamp installation date; output declines before visible light fades. Replace according to manufacturer specifications or measured output.

Outdoor natural sun is beneficial only in a secure pen with shaded shelter and constant access to water. Never put the tortoise in a glass tank in sunlight; overheating can be rapid.

“Full spectrum” on a package does not necessarily mean useful UVB. Check that the bulb is designed for reptile UVB and that distance and obstruction are correct.

07 | Herbivore diet, routine, calcium and weight

Russian tortoises are herbivores. A varied, high-fiber diet should emphasize safe weeds, leafy plants, grasses, and flowers. Good options commonly include dandelion, plantain, mallow, hibiscus leaves and flowers, collard or mustard greens, endive, escarole, and other veterinarian-approved greens.

Avoid feeding only lettuce or grocery greens. Use pesticide-free plants that have been correctly identified; do not collect from lawns treated with herbicides, pesticides, or animal waste. Provide grasses and hay where accepted and appropriate.

Fruit is sugary and should be rare or omitted according to veterinary guidance. Do not feed meat, dairy, dog food, bread, pasta, or insects. Avoid toxic plants and unfamiliar garden clippings.

A complete tortoise pellet can be used only as a measured supplement to a species-appropriate varied diet, not as the sole food. Wash produce and remove uneaten fresh food before it spoils.

Offer fresh greens and weeds daily or follow a veterinarian-directed schedule. Adjust quantity to body condition and activity. A food plate or slate can keep food clean and help wear the beak; do not leave rich food available without tracking weight.

Provide calcium and multivitamins only on a plan matched to diet, UVB exposure, age, and health. Too little calcium and excessive supplementation can both be harmful. Do not combine multiple powders without reviewing labels with a reptile veterinarian.

Weigh the tortoise regularly, especially after adoption or illness. Record weight, shell length, food offered, stool, and activity. Gradual growth is preferable to rapid weight gain or pyramiding; shell appearance can reflect multiple long-term factors.

Fresh drinking water should always be available in a shallow, stable dish that is easy to enter and leave. Change it daily and whenever soiled.

Bring the food and supplement labels to veterinary visits. Do not use a generic internet supplement schedule as an individual prescription.

08 | Bathing, soaking and hydration

Russian tortoises benefit from access to clean shallow water and many care plans include supervised warm soaks, especially for young, newly adopted, or indoor animals. Frequency varies by age, health, hydration, ambient humidity, and veterinary advice; common guidance ranges from once to several times weekly.

For a soak, place the tortoise in a stable, escape-resistant container with shallow lukewarm water below the chin. Supervise continuously for about 10-15 minutes unless a veterinarian gives different instructions. The tortoise must keep its head above water and be able to stand securely.

Do not use soap, oils, salts, or additives. Stop if the tortoise appears weak, distressed, chilled, or unable to hold its head up. Dry gently and return it to a correctly heated enclosure.

Bathing is not a replacement for fresh water, safe humidity, correct temperatures, or treatment for dehydration or illness. Avoid repeated handling if soaking causes significant stress.

Never leave the tortoise unattended in water. A shallow bath can still be dangerous if the animal is weak or cannot keep its head above the surface.

09 | Handling, behavior and cohabitation

Russian tortoises are curious and active, but most do not enjoy frequent lifting. Observe and let the tortoise approach food or enrichment. When lifting is necessary, support the shell from underneath with both hands and hold it low over a secure surface.

Never lift by a leg or tail, tap the shell, paint or pierce the shell, or turn the animal upside down for extended periods. Keep handling sessions brief and calm. A retreating tortoise is asking for space.

House individually as the safest default. Multiple tortoises can compete, bite, ram, or prevent one another from basking or eating; males may be especially persistent. Do not co-house with other reptile species.

Cats and dogs must never have direct access. Even a calm pet can bite, paw, overturn, or stress a tortoise. Children should not carry it without close adult supervision.

A tortoise can recognize routine and food without wanting to be held. Respecting its retreat reduces stress and injury.

10 | Cleaning, daily care and seasonal behavior

Daily: check heat and UVB, water, appetite, stool, activity, enclosure security, and whether the tortoise can reach shade and hides. Remove spoiled food and soiled substrate.

Weekly: inspect shell and skin, spot-clean thoroughly, check humidity and temperatures, and review weight or feeding logs as scheduled. Clean dishes with reptile-only tools.

Seasonal activity can change with day length and outdoor temperatures. Russian tortoises may brumate in nature and may retreat during very hot, dry weather. Do not intentionally brumate an unexamined animal or treat illness-related lethargy as normal seasonal behavior.

If considering brumation, get veterinary clearance, a pre-brumation exam and weight check, and a monitored plan. Never put a sick, underweight, dehydrated, or parasite-positive tortoise into brumation.

Seasonal resting is a veterinary-managed decision. Appetite loss, weight loss, discharge, or weakness should be checked before assuming brumation.

11 | Illness signs and veterinary care

Arrange a baseline reptile-vet exam soon after adoption, with species confirmation, body condition, shell and mouth examination, parasite testing, and a review of diet, lighting, temperatures, substrate, and hydration.

Plan at least annual wellness checks and fecal testing as recommended; new imports, juveniles, reproductive females, or animals with chronic conditions may need closer follow-up.

Sign	Action
Nasal discharge, wheezing, open-mouth breathing	Prompt or urgent veterinary call
Swollen or closed eyes, poor appetite, lethargy	Prompt examination
Soft shell, tremors, weak legs, abnormal growth	Urgent husbandry and veterinary review
Wounds, dog attack, prolapse, collapse	Emergency veterinary care
Weight loss or repeated abnormal stool	Schedule a prompt exam and bring records

Do not give antibiotics, human pain medicine, dewormers, or large vitamin doses without a reptile veterinarian. Keep a photo and written timeline of symptoms.

A tortoise that stops eating while losing weight, has breathing trouble, or becomes weak needs prompt professional assessment.

12 | Approximate U.S. costs and budget

Costs vary by region and enclosure size. A roomy indoor enclosure with safe stand or table, UVB and basking lights, thermostat or dimmer, hides, substrate, digital thermometers, and starter supplies may run about $300-$1,000+, with larger custom habitats costing more. A secure outdoor pen also requires materials, weather protection, shade, and predator-proof construction.

Expense	Planning range (USD)
Tortoise table or custom indoor setup	about $300-$1,000+ upfront
Food, substrate and routine supplies	$25-$75/month
Replacement bulbs and electricity	$10-$40/month; varies
Initial exam and fecal test	about $100-$300; ask local clinics
Emergency reserve	$500-$1,500+ recommended

The animal may be inexpensive compared with decades of housing, lighting, food, and veterinary care. Ask local clinics for exam, fecal, imaging, and emergency fees. Insurance availability and coverage for reptiles vary; ask about exclusions, reimbursement, waiting periods, and pre-existing conditions.

Budget for the adult-sized enclosure before adoption, not only a starter kit. Save a separate emergency fund for exotic-animal veterinary care.

13 | Outdoor time, travel and responsible ownership

A secure outdoor pen can provide natural sunlight and foraging during suitable weather. It needs shade, retreat, clean water, predator-resistant mesh or a solid cover, walls that resist climbing, and barriers against digging out. Supervise outdoor time and avoid pesticides, toxic plants, lawn chemicals, and extreme heat or cold.

For transport, use a secure ventilated carrier with safe temperature and minimal drafts. Never leave the tortoise in a parked vehicle. Arrange a trained caretaker who can check lamps, heat, water, food, and behavior when you travel.

The eBay link supplied by the owner is a reference for the requested Russian Tortoise book. Its full listing details could not be independently confirmed during preparation; verify title, author, and edition on the seller page before purchase. This original guide does not reproduce that book.

Never release a captive tortoise. For rehoming, contact a reputable tortoise rescue, reptile veterinarian, or animal welfare organization, and share the animal’s records, diet, and equipment.

Outdoor access is never unsupervised freedom. Secure shade, water, weather shelter, and escape-proof barriers are essential.

Sources and further reading

Prepared as an original educational summary. It does not reproduce chapters from the supplied book. Husbandry recommendations can vary with animal size, health, climate, and measurement method; confirm your setup with a reptile veterinarian.

- User-supplied eBay book listing
- ReptiFiles - Russian Tortoise Care: Habitat and Health
- Exotic Pet Vets - Russian Tortoise care
- Kensington Bird and Animal Hospital - Russian Tortoise care
- Petco - Russian Tortoise Care Sheet, updated November 2026
- University of Illinois Veterinary Medicine - The Tortoise and Its Care
- Royal Veterinary College - Tortoise post-hibernation checks

When advice conflicts, prioritize an experienced reptile veterinarian who has examined the animal, use measured environmental data, and avoid abrupt changes to heat, lighting, diet, or seasonal activity.