



\*Captive Bred Specialties

## Pancake Tortoise (*Malacochersus tornieri*)

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### **Specialized Rock Dwellers**

Pancake tortoises are a small to medium sized tortoise species found in Africa. Unlike most tortoises, pancake tortoises will rely on their speed and agility, as well as ability to seek refuge in rocky crevices to make themselves inaccessible to predators. Pancake tortoises are most easily identified by their thin, extremely flattened, oblong carapaces that range in color from brown to yellowish brown or grayish brown with an intricate series of lighter brown, yellow, or reddish brown radiating streaks and lines on each scute. They earn their common names of pancake tortoise due to their thin, flattened, oblong shells often resembling the shape, size, and color of pancakes. These tortoises also frequently live in small, isolated colonies within their rocky environments, where multiple individuals may often even share the same rock crevices. During the hottest times of the day, they will seek shelter deep within rock crevices or fissures, or will even aestivate. Pancake tortoises have a very unique biology and natural history, and occupy specialized niches within their environment that are not utilized by any other tortoise species, making them a very unique species of small to mid-sized tortoise species to maintain in captivity or to observe in the wild.

### **Taxonomy**

**Life:** All living, physical, and animate entities

**Domain:** Eukaryota

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Phylum/Sub Phylum:** Chordata/Vertebrata

**Class:** Reptilia

**Order:** Testudines

**Suborder:** Cryptodira

**Superfamily:** Testudinoidea

**Family:** Testudinidae

**Genus:** *Malacochersus*

**Species:** *Malacochersus tornieri*\*

*\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

### **Lifespan and Longevity**

Pancake tortoises, if given the proper care, can live for 50 to 70 years or more and require long term care and commitment.

### **Distribution and Habitat**

Pancake tortoises are indigenous to the dry, rocky, semi-arid regions of eastern Africa (including

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Kenya and Tanzania).

### **Conservation Status**

IUCN Red List Vulnerable (VU).

### **Experience Level Required**

Intermediate/Moderate.

### **Size**

Adult pancake tortoises are small to medium sized tortoise species typically ranging from 6 to 9 inches in carapace, or upper shell length depending on the species, age, and gender, as well as locality.

### **Housing and Enclosure**

Provide a secure and escape proof enclosure. If housed indoors, a minimum of a 4 foot by 3 foot pen, tortoise table, or other enclosure should be used. Substrates that enable burrowing such as a mix of fine aspen chips, organic bark, or coconut fiber substrates are acceptable substrates to use for these mid-sized tortoises. Outdoor pens can work during the warmer months in temperate to sub-tropical climates, and can provide ample access to natural sunlight. Outdoor pens must have a perimeter at least 8 to 9 inches deep and at least 12 inches high. Be sure the enclosure is adequately sealed to prevent access by outdoor predators. Pancake tortoises are also surprisingly good climbers, and enclosure perimeters should be designed to prevent escape either by inward facing lips, or covered with mesh covering. Although they derive much of their water from their food, it is best to provide a shallow water dish or pan within the enclosure, which should be changed every several days or if fouled. Soaking your tortoise at least weekly in lukewarm water can also serve as added hydration. Providing an artificially heated hide box if housed in outdoor enclosures can provide for added safety and security for these tortoises.

### **Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity**

Providing the correct amounts of UVA/UVB overhead incandescent and florescent lighting, and calcium-to-phosphorus ratios is essential for ensuring the health and overall well-being of pancake tortoises in captivity. Without UVA/UVB, or adequate amounts of it, they can be susceptible to the abnormal bone and shell growth and development known as Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD), and other health and development maladies. Pyramiding of the scutes and shell can also occur due to poor or improper diet, lighting, or heating. Always be sure to spot clean the enclosure for urates, feces, or uneaten food at least twice per week. Be sure to periodically replace the substrate, clean, and disinfect the enclosure and its furnishings at minimum every 2 to 3 months. These tortoises require a thermal gradient using a ceramic or radiant heat emitter, UTH (or under tank heating pad), and UVA/UVB overhead lighting. Ambient and cool end temperatures should be within 70 to 82 degrees F and the basking area should be from 95 to 100 degrees F. Maintain a light cycle of 12 to 14 hours per day, and monitor temperatures with a quality thermostat. If kept outside, move inside if daily temperatures drop below 70 degrees, and below the 50's at night. Spot clean the enclosure for urates, feces, or uneaten food at least twice per week, and be sure to periodically replace the substrate, clean, and disinfect the enclosure and its furnishings at minimum every 2 to 3 months. More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

### **Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition**

*Primarily Herbivorous to Omnivorous*; In the wild, pancake tortoises are primarily herbivorous, and will graze upon a variety of grasses, flowers, fruits, vegetable and other plant matter. They

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will also occasionally consume insects, carrion, such as dead or decaying plant and animal matter, or other invertebrates. In captivity, these small tortoises can be given a mixed and varied assortment of chopped up greens and vegetables daily or as otherwise directed. Avoid spinach, citric fruits, Iceberg lettuce, and other acidic or otherwise nutritionally poor food items. More food items to avoid include most grain products, and dog and cat foods. Many flowers, dandelions, hibiscus, turnip, kale, mustard, and collard greens are also suitable choices. Ensure that all food intended for food for herbivorous to omnivorous animals is chemical, pesticide and herbicide free. Many of these are readily available in any grocer's market. Several commercially available herbivore and veggie mix diets are also available which can be used. Food items given should be sprayed with additional calcium and vitamin D3 supplementation 1 to 2 times weekly or as otherwise directed for optimal health and development. This is in order to prevent Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD), shell pyramiding, and other shell and bone growth and nutritional deficiencies and maladies. Their feeding frequency can also often depend on the age, size, and overall health of your animal. Use care as to not overfeed turtles or tortoises, as obesity and other health related issues can become an issue. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

### **Handling**

Most small to mid-sized turtle and tortoise species that are not aggressive or prone to biting can be picked up and handled either by placing both hands along both sides of the shell, or from the rear of the carapace with the thumb on the carapace and index through pinky fingers on the plastron to reduce the chances of being kicked, scratched, or nipped when they are threatened. Although most species of chelonians are not outwardly aggressive, defensive, or dangerous, they can become stressed as a result of over-handling, however, and some species, and even individual animals can be shyer than others. These are some considerations to keep in mind when handling any chelonian species.

**\*\*Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens\*\***

### **Contact**

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this animal, group of animals, or this care sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at [info@madisonherps.org](mailto:info@madisonherps.org)

*Disclaimer: Note that the information provided in these, or any care sheets, are not intended to be all-exhaustive, and further research and care should always be sought and provided when it comes to any species one may prospectively be interested in. These care sheets are also not intended to serve as substitutes for professional veterinary medical care and husbandry should any animal require it. Always seek proper and professional veterinary care for any animal should the need arise, and be prepared ahead of time for any and all husbandry costs and expenses that may occur with any animal beyond the initial purchase. Any animal owned is ultimately a matter of personal/individual care and responsibility.*

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