

## ALDABRA GIANT TORTOISE

*Aldabrachelys gigantea*



**Location:** The Aldabra giant tortoise inhabits the Aldabra Islands, a coral atoll comprised of 4 islands in the Seychelles, which is located between the coast of Kenya and the northern tip of Madagascar. The Aldabra giant tortoise occurs in many different habitats. The largest tortoise concentrations are found on the grasslands called platins; the grasslands are often dotted with trees and bushes. It also frequents scrublands, mangrove swamps and coastal dunes.

**Diet:** These animals are primarily herbivores with the ability to both graze and browse. In the drier areas, they graze mostly on sedges, and a combination of native species of grasses and herbs. Many of these distinct plants are naturally dwarfed and grow their seeds not from the tops of the plants, but closer to the ground to avoid the tortoises' close cropping jaws. In the wooded and scrub areas, tortoises browse on many types of woody plants. A number of species are readily eaten, and some show a conspicuous browse line about 3 feet above the ground, which is about as high as the tortoises can stretch their necks.

**Life Cycle:** Aldabra giant tortoises are found both individually and in herds. They mainly feed in the mornings and continue until the temperature becomes too hot. Sheltering trees or bushes are necessary to escape the extreme mid-day sun; some tortoises cool themselves in pools or mud holes.

Mating of Aldabra giant tortoises usually occurs between February and May. The eggs are carried within the female's body for about 2.5 months. During the dry season, the female digs a flask-shaped cavity where she deposits her eggs. The number of eggs produced per clutch varies from approximately 4-14; captive animals may lay up to 25 eggs. The length of the incubation period is temperature dependent; in warm temperatures, eggs hatch in approximately 3.5 months, and in cool temperatures, eggs take over 8 months to hatch. There is no parental care and the hatchlings are independent.

The young have the potential to grow rapidly, which is a necessary survival adaptation. Tortoises less than 8 inches long are liable to be preyed upon by several large bird species and land crabs. Sexual maturity is determined by size rather than by age; most individuals begin to reproduce when they are around 25 years of age. Once they reach adulthood, growth slows.

Male Aldabra giant tortoises are substantially larger than the females. Typical adult females are roughly 2.5 feet long, while males tend to be more than 3 feet in length. Most adults weigh between 350-500 pounds; some individuals can exceed 500 pounds. Aldabra giant tortoises are long-lived animals; their longevity is unknown but may surpass 100 years. These tortoises tend to outlive researchers and no sufficient records have been kept.

**Remarks:** Among tortoises, the Aldabra giant tortoise is regarded as 1 of the 2 largest land tortoises; the other species resides on the Galapagos Islands. The Aldabra giant tortoise has an overall uniform dark gray or black color with a long neck and small head. When startled, the tortoise pulls its head and limbs inside the shell with a loud, prolonged hiss. The front legs are arranged to make the elbows meet in the middle, thereby protecting the entrance to the shell with the scaly skin. The hind legs and tail are similarly withdrawn, with the soles of the hind feet sealing the entrance.

Aldabra giant tortoises are the largest animals on the atoll. The tortoises fill a niche similar to that occupied by elephants in Africa and Asia. As with elephants, they are the main consumers of vegetation and noticeably alter the habitat during their search for food. Tortoises have been known to knock over small trees and shrubs to obtain nutritious leaves. This makes pathways and clearings within the forestlands for other animals. Seeds pass through the tortoise's digestive tract and eventually become food for many other species.