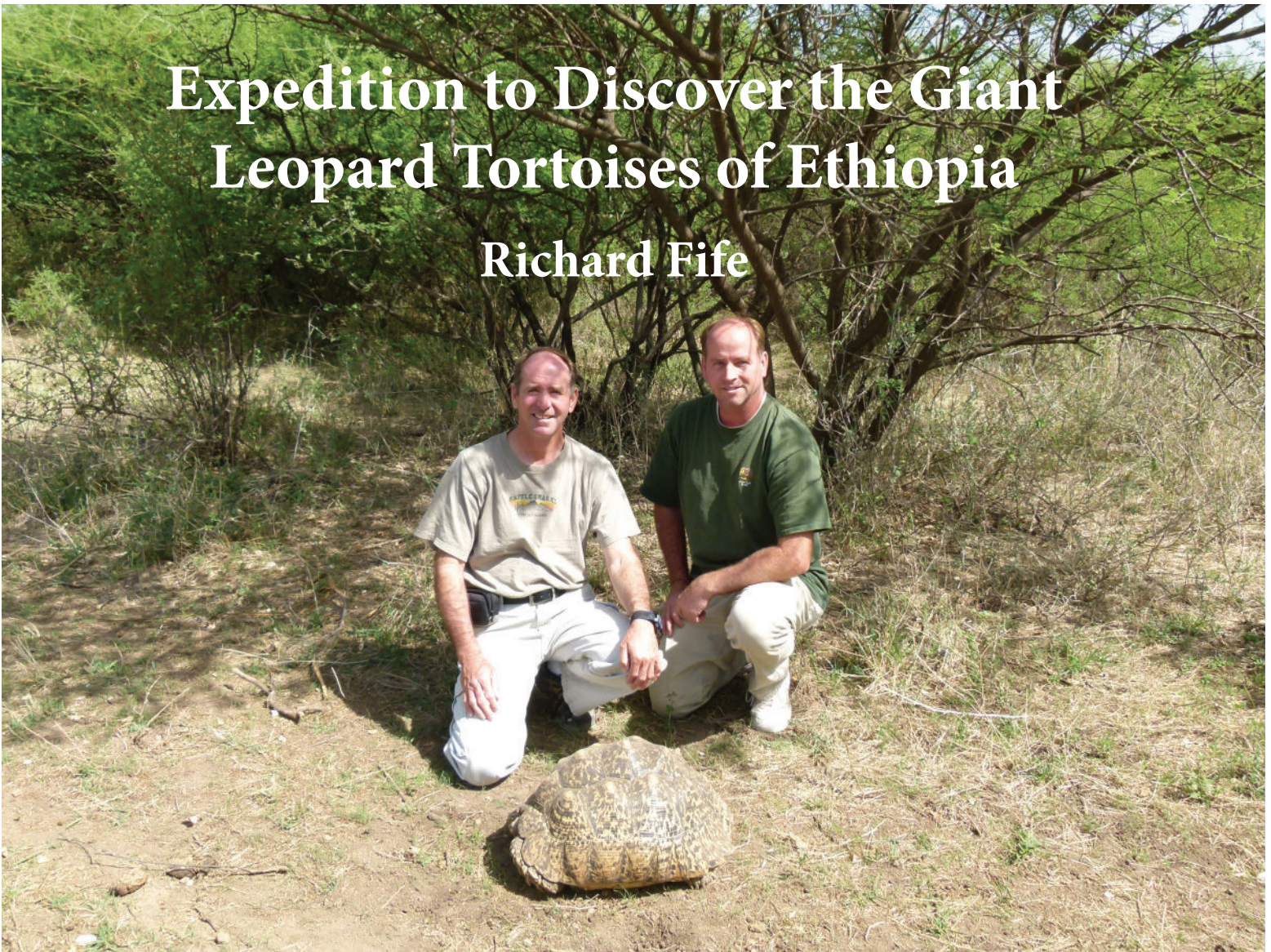


Expedition to Discover the Giant Leopard Tortoises of Ethiopia

Richard Fife



In March 2011 my brother Jerry, my wife, and I traveled to Ethiopia to search for the giant leopard tortoises (*Stigmochelys pardalis*), which we had heard were there. We arrived at the Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on the morning of March 25, 2011. At the time my daughter, her husband, and their four children were living in Addis Ababa (My son-in-law is an attorney for USAID). When we arrived, we immediately headed to the “International Community School of Addis Ababa” which my grandchildren attended.

Even though we had just spent many hours flying from Phoenix, Arizona, we were anxious to see the tortoises my daughter had reported were in the school yard. She had told me there were leopard tortoises there that were much larger than any I had at home in the USA, and she was right! The first tortoise we found was a male which measured a whopping 26 inches, making it the largest leopard tortoise I had ever seen. There were two pairs of leopard tortoises on the

school grounds, with the males measuring about 26 inches and females about 20 inches. It immediately appeared that our trip would be a great success.

In 2005, Jerry and I had traveled to South Africa to see and photograph the giant leopard tortoises of South Africa. We visited the Addo Elephant Park, where we photographed “Domkrag” or “Car Jack” a 24 inch leopard tortoise once considered to be the largest in the world (only its shell remains). We also saw wild leopard tortoises at the Addo Elephant Park that were nearly as large.

We later heard of accounts of giant leopard tortoises inhabiting Ethiopia and Somalia, so we also wanted to see those giants. We had seen photos of giant leopard tortoises which appeared to be larger than those in South Africa. A Google search suggested that the Ethiopian tortoises may grow to one meter (this could be over the shell). I had talked to collectors in other countries, who assured me they had tortoises, from Ethiopia, which were well over 24 inches and one



Richard Fife at Awash National Park Ethiopia with male (right) and female (left) leopard tortoises. Photo by Jerry Fife.

dealer offers Ethiopian leopard tortoises for sale that were 27.5 inches (70 cm). Due to political uprisings throughout Africa, undependable transportation, and warring among the local tribes, it seemed highly unlikely that Jerry and I would ever be traveling to Ethiopia, but here we were.

The leopard tortoise is currently recognized by two subspecies; *Stigmochelys p. pardalis*, the southern race and *Stigmochelys p. babcocki*, the northern race. For

years, there has been a debate concerning the validity of the subspecies of *Stigmochelys pardalis*. The IUCN Red List states that "A recent Africa-wide phylogeographic study (Fritz et al., 2010) argued that there is no basis for the recognition of *Stigmochelys p. babcocki*."

Stigmochelys pardalis babcocki is generally described as the smaller of the two subspecies and measures between 10 inches to about 18 inches and *Stigmochelys pardalis pardalis* is the larger subspecies and measures between 18 inches to about 24 inches. Ethiopia is more than 2,000 miles north of South Africa and thus many miles outside the range of *S. p. pardalis*, so the giant Ethiopian tortoises would be considered

Stigmochelys p. babcocki and actually the larger of the two subspecies, if the subspecies are valid.

Ethiopia is a very poor country with an ancient Christian and Muslim background. It is slightly less than twice the size of Texas. The great African Rift Valley extends across the country. The country lies just north of the equator. There are over 80 million people in Ethiopia, making it one of the densest populations in the world. The people speak Amharic, tribal languages, and a little English. The capital city is Addis Ababa (in the center of the country) and is at an elevation of about 7,500 feet making it the third highest capital in the world.

The native tribes live much as they have lived for hundreds of years and continue to war amongst themselves. Most of the wildlife, including reptiles, is gone and the wildlife reserves have a hard time protecting the wildlife which remains.

After a needed good night's sleep we headed to Awash National Park. My daughter drove us in their Toyota Sequoia and, of course, my four grandkids came along as it was their spring break from school. My daughter drove just like the locals where traffic laws seemed irrelevant. The roads were crowded with small busses called 'blue donkeys', which were packed with passengers. We shared the road with lots of people walking to their destinations, trucks, real donkeys, donkey carts, goats, sheep, horses, cows, and even



camels. Driving was a free for all! Any lane, speed limit, or direction seemed to be just fine. Fortunately, we arrived safely in Awash after about four or five hours of driving. As we drove through the park we saw baboons, monkeys, crocodiles, and an array of hoof stock and birds.

Our destination was the Awash Falls Lodge, where we spent the next two nights. We were immediately successful in locating a large leopard tortoise, but unfortunately it was only an empty shell. It was a male, which measured 26 inches. The staff at the lodge said we would find more tortoise shells at the small museum a short distance away so we headed to what could very reluctantly be called a museum. The museum housed several dusty animal pelts, mounted animal heads, a snake rib cage, photos, and to our excitement, three leopard tortoise shells. Two of the shells were males and measured about 26 inches in length. The third had belonged to a small seven to eight inch tortoise. There was no question now that there were indeed giant leopard tortoises in Ethiopia! It is interesting to note that the literature only reports African spurred tortoises (*Centrochelys sulcata*) at Awash. We didn't see any evidence of African spurred tortoises in Awash or anywhere we visited in Ethiopia.

Travel off the main roads in Ethiopia can be very dangerous so my daughter had arranged for armed guides to travel with us (required by the park). The local tribes are at war and passage across tribal land requires permission from each tribe. Our guide told us that a leopard tortoise shell had been collected on the mountains to the northwest of Lake Basaka. He made arrangements for us to visit the Hyena Caves near the lake. As we hiked to the caves, we were joined by the local tribesmen. We crossed a deep crevice in the earth which was part of the "rift" the result of an ancient earthquake. We were told that rock pythons lived in the crevasses.

At night, the hyenas leave their caves in search of food. What an eerie experience. We sat silently some distance from the caves, as the sun went down, and



Travel outside of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

watched as one by one the hyenas snuck out of the caves and into the darkness. We didn't find any leopard tortoises. At the lodge we were told that leopard tortoises had occasionally been spotted around the campsites near Awash Falls but a morning hunt failed to reveal any tortoises.

A bit disappointed, we headed back to Addis Ababa. Suddenly Jerry yelled out, STOP! Jerry had spotted a lone tortoise about 100 feet off the road. It was a 20 inch male leopard tortoise. We left the safety of the car and began to search the surrounding area. With the help of my granddaughter I was successful in finding a pair of large leopard tortoises beneath a thorn



Richard Fife at Awash National Park Museum with male leopard tortoise shell. Photo by Jerry Fife.



Richard's grandchildren at Awash National Park Ethiopia with a male leopard tortoise.



Richard Fife at Awash National Park Ethiopia with male leopard tortoise.

bush. My hands and arms were bleeding by the time I had extracted the tortoises but it was well worth it! The female was about 24 inches and the male was a giant at 28 inches.

The next day, we headed to Arba Minch, a town near Nechisar (white grass) National Park, Lake Chamo,

and Abaya Lake some 250 miles south of Addis Ababa. Our expedition continued in the Toyota Sequoia and my son-in-law took over driving. We also had a second vehicle, a Toyota Land Cruiser operated by a hired driver and guide. We carried several large gas cans filled with regular gas because most stations in Ethiopia only carry diesel fuel and it was good we did. We were almost out of all our gasoline before we found a station that had gasoline.

It was slow going and took nearly 10 hours to travel the 250 miles to Arba Minch. On our way, we stopped at a restaurant in the town of Sodo for lunch. We ordered roasted chicken. I ordered a half a chicken, which was equivalent to one hot wing in the USA and was as tough as snake leather. There was a 20 inch leopard tortoise shell at the restaurant. This was the twelfth leopard tortoise we encountered.

We stayed at the Swayne's Hotel, which overlooks the Nechisar National Park. We boarded a boat at Lake Chamo to see huge Nile crocodiles and hippopotamuses at the place they call the "Crocodile Market" (not really a market but plenty of huge crocodiles). We saw monkeys, baboons, beautiful birds, and brightly colored agamas (blue body with a red head) in the park. Unfortunately, due to unsafe road conditions in the park, and unrest among the native tribes, we were unable to travel in most of the park, and we didn't see any leopard tortoises.

We then headed back north and after a night spent at Dorze, a native village in the highlands, we journeyed to Lake Langano and checked into the Bishangari Lodge. That night, my daughter found a dark-colored snake in her cabin but due to poor lighting we were unable to identify the snake. One of the lodge guides said it was a young cobra, another suggested it was a black mamba, and still another said it was a common non-venomous snake. We saw beautiful blue agamas as well as the ever-present baboons. We spent the morning hunting for leopard tortoises without success. A guide at the Bishangari Lodge said there were big tortoises at the Sabana Lodge, further north on the lake.

We drove to the Sabana Lodge and convinced the guards at the gate that we should be allowed into the complex so we could "check out the rooms". They let us into the compound and after a few minutes we located the tortoise pen. It housed three large leopard

ard tortoises ranging in size from 20 inches to about 27 inches.

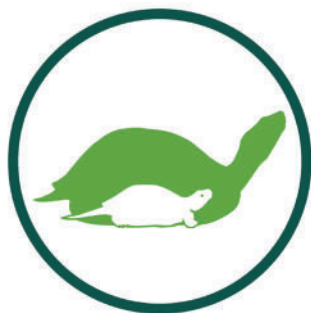
Back in Addis Ababa, my daughter said there were two more places to see leopard tortoises. One was the Palace grounds, which were not open to the public and the other was the Lion Zoo. We paid our entrance fee to enter the zoo and paid an additional fee to take pictures. The zoo included a center section containing antique lion cages, which housed the lions. In the space between the guard rail and the lion cages were leopard tortoises. These were the darkest leopard tortoises we saw on our trip. The tortoises appeared as though they were covered with a black mold or moss but we were unable to get close enough to get a good look at the them. There were three large tortoises that we estimated to be about 20 to 26 inches.

We saw a total of 18 leopard tortoises on our trip. The average size was over 24 inches. From what we

saw in Ethiopia, male tortoises seem to be larger than females. This is opposite to most of the leopard tortoises in the USA where females are larger than males. Most of the tortoises had nicely marked shells, showing little wear even at 20 inches, suggesting they were still young tortoises. I learned later that there is a nice group of reproducing leopard tortoises on the grounds of the German Embassy in Addis Ababa.

We had a wonderful adventure. Unfortunately, I am unaware of any of the giant Ethiopian leopard tortoises in the USA. The US Department of Agriculture will not allow any leopard tortoises to be imported into the USA due to the concern of an African tick, which carries 'heart water disease'. I hope the Ethiopian population of giant leopard tortoises can survive for future generations of tortoise aficionados to experience.

Richard Fife is the owner and operator of Riparian Farms, a turtle and tortoise breeding facility located in southeast Arizona. He developed the "Ivory Tortoise", which is a dark-eyed form of albinic African spurred tortoise. He also works with other species of turtles and tortoises including several "at risk" Asian species including species of *Cuora*. Richard was employed by the Gladys Porter Zoo, as Assistant Curator of Reptiles, and left the zoo in 1978. Over the years he has improved many turtle and tortoise husbandry techniques, including methods to mitigate pyramiding in captive tortoises and has co-authored a study on temperature and sex determination in tortoises. He has written many popular articles about turtles and tortoises. He is active in local and federal legislation and helped write the current USDA regulation, which allows the movement of certain land tortoises if they are certified tick-free. He met with and petitioned the FDA to amend the 4-inch turtle rule. Richard was one of the founding members of the "National Turtle and Tortoise Association" and past president of the "Arizona Herpetological Association". He co-authored *Leopard Tortoises: The Natural History, Captive Care and Breeding of Stigmochelys pardalis* with his brother Jerry Fife. He has spoken to groups on the subject of turtles and tortoises throughout the USA, in Vienna Austria, Johannesburg, South African, and the Galapagos Islands. Richard has traveled on numerous "Wildlife Expeditions" with his brother Jerry. He retired from the Department of Public Works Engineering, City of Sierra Vista, Arizona in 2015. He has seven children and 19 grandchildren.



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