



*Photo Credit: Ingrid Rawling

Arboreal Alligator Lizards (*Abronía spp.*)

Amazing Abronia!

Also known as the Abronia arboreal alligator lizards, or simply “Abronia”, arboreal alligator lizards are a genus of moderately to large sized, arboreal anguid lizards inhabiting cloud forests and other areas of high elevation from Mexico and across Central America, to northern South America. These lizards possess heavily ossified to plated scalation and fairly elongated bodies, lending to their common names of “alligator” lizard, which, in most species, range in color from bright to dull, olive green, to sometimes bluish-green to blackish. Some juvenile specimens can also have a black and yellow banded pattern as well. The heads are also fairly large and wedge shaped, and the areas around the eyes and pupils often have a lighter colored ring. Most Abronia species are threatened to endangered in their natural ranges due to habitat destruction and fragmentation, and some species are already believed to be extinct. As their name implies, these lizards are highly arboreal, foraging for food and seeking shelter high in the treetops and canopies. Although highly arboreal, these lizards may also quickly drop to the forest floor and quickly retreat when threatened. There are approximately 28 species in the genus Abronia, with the species *A. graminea* perhaps being the most widely kept and available of the species in the pet trade.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Lacertilia

Infraorder: Diploglossa

Family: Anguidae

Genus: Abronia

Species: *Abronía spp.**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, arboreal alligator lizards can attain potential longevity of 10 to 15 years or more in captivity.

Distribution and Habitat

Many of the approximately 28 species of arboreal alligator lizard species are fragmented in distribution, and occur in the cloud forests and other high montane and altitude areas of Mexico and Guatemala, throughout Central America, and into northern South America. They may also be found on occasion in other habitats such as high altitude pine and scrub forests. These lizards will also use bromeliads, ferns, orchids, and other epiphytic plants as sources of shelter, food, hydration, and humidity.

Origin/History

Abronia spp. Gray, 1838. The specific species and subspecies would have other authors first describing them during other years.

Historically, the Abronia genus was not very well known or studied in the wild, and perhaps even less well known in captivity and the pet trade. The Mexican Arboreal Alligator Lizard (Abronia graminea) would perhaps be the first and most well known of the Abronia species to be imported through various avenues, both legally and illegally. The first Abronia spp. would begin to appear in the pet trade by around 1994, or the early to mid-1990's. While captive bred Abronia spp. would become available, it would oftentimes still be less expensive to obtain wild-collected specimens, and the keys for successfully breeding this genus of unique lizards has yet to become widely known or available.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate to Advanced.

Size

Adult arboreal alligator lizards can vary in size depending on the species from 7.0 to 12.0 inches in total snout-to-tail length. Some species may reach larger sizes of up to 24.0 inches or larger in snout-to-tail length. Maximum snout-to-vent length varies depending on the exact species, but can range from about 2.9 to 5.3 inches snout-to-vent length (SVL).

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Arboreal. Providing proper housing, enclosures, humidity, and temperatures are all very important for maintaining arboreal alligator lizards successfully. Provide a secure, escape proof enclosure that is also adequately ventilated. Males, and young lizards especially should be housed separately, although pairs and young of no greater than 3 or 4 per enclosure can be maintained together. These lizards are primarily arboreal, and should be provided with more height than floor space. A screen, plastic, or glass front opening enclosure of at least 20 to 30 gallons tall or equivalent sized for a pair of these lizards is recommended. A substrate that provides and retains adequate humidity should then be used, and can include 2 to 4 inches of sphagnum moss, peat moss, or similar substrates. Substrate should be kept on a moist to dry gradient to provide sufficient moisture and cooling, as well as humidity in the enclosure. Ample cover, hiding, climbing, and basking opportunities should also be a component to any arboreal alligator lizard enclosure in the form of live or artificial vertical, horizontal, and diagonal climbing branches, perches, cork bark slabs, orchids, and/or bromeliads.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Providing access to natural UVA/UVB (ultraviolet) sunlight is greatly beneficial to the overall health and appearance of these species. Natural sunlight and/or 7 to 10% UVA/UVB lighting, heating, or mercury vapor bulbs can be used depending on one's seasonality and regional conditions. These lizards experience great day and night, as well as seasonal temperature variations in their natural habitats, although in captivity, they can generally be offered a thermal gradient in the enclosure with a warm, or basking area of 85 to 90 degrees F, and a cooler and

ambient enclosure temperature of 75 to 85 degrees F. They can tolerate short periods of temperatures as low as 45 degrees F, although it is generally not recommended that temperatures exceed or fall below these ranges. Abronia, especially younger animals, can be quite susceptible to overheating if maintained at incorrect conditions. 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. 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. These species of arboreal alligator lizards can be quite sensitive when it comes to overall relative humidity, and require moderate to high levels, from at, or within 50 to 80%, depending on the exact species being maintained.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Primarily Insectivorous; In the wild, arboreal alligator lizards are primarily insectivorous, meaning they will eat a variety of both insects, arthropods, arachnids, and other invertebrates. They may also eat smaller reptiles and amphibians, bird and reptile eggs, and smaller mammals such as rodents and young birds as well if they can be located and captured. In captivity, arboreal alligator lizards are largely insectivorous. They can be offered crickets, mealworms, superworms, roaches, and waxworms. Adults and young can be fed and maintained on a similar schedule of 2 to 3 times weekly. Other invertebrate feeder items which may be eaten can include hornworms, snails, spiders, and Phoenix worms. Gut load these prey items by feeding them commercially available diets for added nutritional value. Arboreal alligator lizards may eat pinky mice as well, and other minor sources of protein, but feed them these sparingly, if at all. Feed alligator lizards these insects/food items in a bowl or dish every other day. A variety of feeder invertebrates, especially those low in protein, are perhaps best for these lizards. As with many reptiles, also provide calcium and vitamin D3 supplements in these lizard's diets whenever possible as well.

When it comes to hydration, special attention must be provided in this area as well. Misting the enclosure, its plants, and the animals themselves daily will greatly provide direct and indirect hydration, as these lizards will drink from condensation in the enclosure. Additionally, a dripper, or commercially available fogger or misting system can also be used and installed to provide supplemental humidity and hydration two to three times weekly. Too high of moisture and humidity should be prevented however, as this promotes fungal and mold growth, and can lead to unsanitary enclosure conditions for these animals. 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

When first captured or handled, arboreal alligator lizards can be known to be quite pugnacious, and able to deliver a surprisingly strong bite. With regular time, handling, and interaction, however, these lizards can become quite tame and accustomed to being hand fed and short periods of handling, but are still not an overly hands on pet lizard genus. Some may remain pugnacious and prone to bite when handled. As with any animal though, care should be taken to avoid dropping or overly restraining them to prevent injury.

****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

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