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Argentine Black and White Tegu (*Salvator merianae*)

Blue Tegu (*Salvator spp.*)

Versatile and Convergent Monitor Cousins

Tegus are the largest members of a large group of primarily new world lizards known as the “teiids”, which also include whiptails and racerunners. Black and white tegus are large lizards superficially resembling a monitor lizard with small, granular scales ranging in color from grayish or blackish, to olive with several rows of darker stripes or banding along the body and whitish speckles, dots, dashes, and blotches. Their tongues are long, forked, and snake-like. Other species of tegus can be reddish, golden-yellow, or bluish in color. Adult male tegus of all species also develop large and distinctive jowls on their cheeks and throats as well. The smaller and similar **Blue Tegu** (*Tupinambis/Salvator spp.*) is believed to be a smaller race of the same species, *T./S. merianae*. It is similar in appearance to the Argentine black and white tegu, but tends to have a paler blue or teal ground color.

An active and diurnal group of species that are among the largest lizards over much of their range, tegus are opportunistic omnivores which will hunt and search for a wide variety of smaller vertebrate and invertebrate prey, and are able to utilize their tails as fat storage reserves for long periods of brumation or other harsh conditions, as do many other lizards. These lizards are also very intelligent and perceptive, and are excellent diggers, or burrowers, often using their strong claws, limbs, and tails to dig deep, slightly moist and humid burrows or to access rocky crevices in order to seek shelter and refuge. Although tegus certainly are not for everyone, these large and increasingly popular lizards can make for excellent pets for the right individuals willing and able to dedicate the time, space, and resources for these large and amazing lizards!

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Lacertilia

Infraorder: Scincomorpha

Family: Teiidae

Genus: Salvator

Species: *Salvator merianae**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, tegus can attain longevity of 15 to 25 years or more in captivity.

Distribution and Habitat

The Argentine black and white tegu is a large species of primarily terrestrial teiid lizard, and the largest member of its genus, being indigenous to much of eastern to central South America. More specifically, this species can occur from Brazil, through Uruguay, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Argentina. It is also introduced in some areas of the southern United States, namely southern Florida. Within its broad range, Argentine black and white tegus are highly versatile, and can occupy a variety of terrestrial environments and habitats, from tropical to dry rainforests, forests, and open savannahs and woodlands, to semi-arid deserts, grasslands, and scrublands, to coastal areas, mountainous areas, and irrigated or other agricultural and suburban and residential areas.

Origin/History

Salvator merianae A.M.C. Duméril & Bibron, 1839.

Tegus have been kept and imported as pets from South America for many decades. The Argentine black and white tegu was first imported to the U.S. in 1989, when the late Bert Langerwerf brought some back from Argentina that he successfully bred in a captive environment (Johnny Laocca 2017). The Argentine Black and White Tegu (*Salvator merianae*) would become one of the most popular and docile of the tegu species.

Tegus were initially imported primarily for zoos and other educational purposes, but they became increasingly popular as pets in the 1990s and 2000s. Unfortunately, many tegus that were kept as pets were released or escaped into the wild, and now there are established populations of tegus in several areas of the United States, including Florida, and several other Southeastern U.S. states such as Georgia and South Carolina. Breeding populations of invasive black and white tegus were first detected in Florida during about 2012.

The status of the “blue” tegu also became somewhat contentious, with the majority of data about the blue tegu originating from hobbyists. Some believe it is a mutation of the Argentine black and white tegu, while others, including the original importer, believe it is sufficiently different to be classified as its own species, or a subspecies. The first blue tegu to be exported from South America was in a wholesale shipment of tegus from Colombia.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate to Advanced.

Size

Hatchling tegus have a much more vibrant green coloration than adults, and are 8.0 to 10.0 inches in total snout-to-tail length. Most adult tegus range from 3 ½ to 4 ½ feet in length or greater, or about 42.0 to 59.0 inches in total snout-to-tail length, with males being larger than females. Maximum snout to vent length ranges up to 19.6 inches (SVL).

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial. Housing must also be sealed and escape proof. Hatchling tegus can be started out in a 20 gallon long enclosure, but will soon require larger accommodations. Enclosure size should be increased accordingly depending on the animal's size. If standard glass terrariums with screen tops are used at any point, ensure that adequate

humidity and temperatures are maintained using additional steps to retain it. Adult tegus will require a minimum of a six foot by three foot terrarium or enclosure or larger. Very large, custom designed pens or enclosures are perhaps the most suitable housing for most tegus. Tegus are also powerful diggers, and should also be provided with substrates that enable burrowing and retain humidity well such as chemical and pesticide free potting soil, cypress mulch, orchid bark substrates. Be sure to provide at least 18 to 24 inches of substrate. Tegus in general are very intelligent, alert and perceptive animals, and will require sufficient levels of safety, security, and stimulation and enrichment in order to do well in captivity. Provide a hide box and artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, slabs, or logs for ample basking and hiding opportunities. A large enough water bowl or dish that they can readily enter and exit from that can work with one's enclosure setup and arrangement is also strongly recommended for maintaining adequate longer term hydration, humidity, and quality of life for these lizards. Water should be changed or filtered regularly at a minimum of every other day to maintain cleanliness and sanitary conditions. Tegus are primarily terrestrial species, but will climb readily if given the opportunity.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

For lighting and heating, maintain ambient temperatures inside the enclosure from 85 to 90 degrees F that can be allowed to drop about 10 degrees F from this at night. Tegus will also bask, and require basking temperatures of about 95 to 100 degrees F. This can be provided through overhead UVA/UVB lighting of appropriate wattage, under tank heating pads (UTHS), ceramic or radiant heat emitters, and/or red bulbs. Temperatures should also be adequately monitored using a reliable thermostat as well. 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, particularly water bowls and substrates intended for raising humidity levels (such as cypress mulch, sphagnum moss, etc.). 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. Tegus are able to tolerate a wide gradient of overall relative humidity levels within their enclosures ranging from lows within their enclosure, but generally should generally be maintained at moderate to high humidity levels at, or within 60 to 80% or more through means of providing them with the correct and suitable substrates, as well as other humid hides and retreats. These husbandry components are perhaps the best ways of ensuring the proper humidity levels for your tegu in captivity.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Omnivorous to Carnivorous; In the wild, tegus are omnivorous, and will consume a variety of fruit, vegetable, and other plant matter as well as many types of insects and other invertebrates, small mammals, birds, reptiles, eggs, and carrion, or dead and decaying plant and animal matter. In captivity, variety is essential to a proper and adequate tegu diet. Tegus will accept a variety of feeder insects of appropriate size including crickets, roaches, mealworms, superworms, and waxworms supplemented with vitamin D3 and calcium, but do not overfeed them with too many high fat insects. At least some tegus will also accept chopped greens, fruits and vegetables as well as ground beef, fish, chicken, liver, or turkey any of which with bone meal added. Frozen, thawed rodents of appropriate size can also be offered, but sparingly, as these food items are high in fat and protein for tegus. It is also important to remember not to overfeed tegus, as they can become very prone to obesity. Feeding schedules can depend on the age, size, and overall health of your tegu, but typically, an appropriate feeding regime for young and hatchling tegus can be daily to two to three times weekly for adult animals. Most tegus are very alert, intelligent and personable species that can become food aggressive when in the presence of food, and therefore require additional care when handling. 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

Argentine black and white tegus, and other species of tegus in general, are animals that require considerable amounts of regular time, patience, and commitment in order to become docile, handleable adult animals. Many different techniques and mindsets are out there with regards to handling and working with these reptiles, which can certainly go into far greater depth than the scope of this basic care sheet. Many believe a more hands off approach is more successful overall, and allowing the animal to gradually and routinely become accustomed to their keeper's presence, to being touched, and handled. Others may choose to practice a more direct, routine handling approach, which may or may not be effective, but often unfortunately causes greater stress and/or injury to the keeper and the animal. Once in the hand, hatchling tegus can be handled with both hands cupped with care not to drop or restrain them tightly. An adult tegu (as well as other species of large lizards) should always receive adequate bodily support from underneath using the hand, and arm for support. Additional restraint can be made by tucking or pinning the animal's tail or hind quarters between the arm and body as well. Each tegu is an individual animal, and these techniques may not be effective for all tegus, but are nonetheless the most commonly utilized. Tegus certainly are not for everyone, but with the right techniques and husbandry, can make for very intelligent and personable pets.

****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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