



**Photo Credit: Robert Balsiger*

Chuckwallas (*Sauromalus* spp.)

Docile Iguanids of the Southwest

Chuckwallas are relatively medium sized iguanid lizards of the southwestern United States and Mexico. These territorial lizards are primarily diurnal (active during the day), and are most often found in rocky areas within their range, where they will seek refuge in rock cracks and crevices as shelter and from potential predators, making themselves inaccessible when wedged into a crevice. There are roughly five or six species of chuckwallas that can be quite variable in color from blackish, reddish or pinkish, grayish, or olive gray, sometimes with patterning of scattered light and dark contrasting banding or spots, particularly in females and younger animals. Males will often develop noticeably darker, contrasting heads, shoulders, and limbs, particularly during breeding and reproduction with females. Chuckwallas in general are stocky bodied lizards with loose folds of skin along their neck and bodies, and relatively thick, tapering tails ending in a blunt tip, and fairly small, coarsely granular scales.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Lacertilia

Infraorder: Iguania

Family: Iguanidae

Genus: *Sauromalus*

Species: *Sauromalus* spp.*

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care in captivity, chuckwallas can attain longevity of at least 20 to 25 years, if not more.

Distribution and Habitat

Chuckwallas are a genus of relatively medium sized, terrestrial iguanid lizards indigenous to the western to southwestern United States, and into northern Mexico along the Gulf Coast of Mexico. Within this range, they may, more specifically, occur within the Mojave and Sonoran Deserts, where they inhabit rocky, arid to semi-arid deserts to semi-deserts, scrublands, open dry forests, woodlands, and scrub forests, to savannahs, rocky hillsides, and grasslands. Chuckwallas also will inhabit island and coastal, or coastal dunes habitats as well. These lizards favor moderately vegetated, rocky habitats and lava flows in which to thermoregulate, forage for food, and to seek refuge in the rocky fissures and crevices to avoid predation.

Origin/History

Sauromalus sp. Dumeril, 1856; Sauromalus ater Dumeril, 1856.

It is unfortunately unknown when, or for how long chuckwallas have been kept in the pet trade although these lizards may have been since at least the 1970's or 1980's. However, most, if not all U.S. states in which they are native to would regulate or restrict their wild-collection.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Chuckwallas can vary in size depending on the species and locality, with their general sizes ranging from 15.0 to 30.0 inches as adults in total snout-to-tail length. However, the Common Chuckwalla, *Sauromalus ater*, tends to reach an average of 15.0 to 24.0 inches snout-to-tail length as adults. Average snout-to-vent lengths (SVLs) may vary depending on the exact species, but generally between 7.6 and 13.3 inches snout-to-vent length (SVL).

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial. Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Hatchling and young chuckwallas can be housed in a 20 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult Chuckwallas require a minimum of a 40 gallon long terrarium or larger 4' x 2' enclosure. Some of the larger individuals may require larger housing. Hatchling and adult chuckwallas can be maintained on a substrate of play sand mixtures, or ground walnut shell substrates. Avoid using substrates made from reptile bark that result in environments that are too humid. Provide a small dish of clean water, and change and clean it every several days, or sooner if fouled. Soaking them at least once weekly in lukewarm water for 15 to 20 minutes can also help raise their hydration. Provide ample basking and hiding opportunities by providing artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, or logs.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Chuckwallas are well suited for living in hot, arid conditions. For basking, create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure with an appropriate sized under tank heating pad, ceramic, or radiant heat emitter. Ideal temperatures for chuckwallas range in the low to mid 90's degrees F on the cool side and around 120 degrees F on the warm, basking side. 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 chuckwallas in captivity. Without UVA/UVB, or adequate amounts of it, they can be susceptible to the abnormal bone growth and development known as Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD), and other health and development maladies. Also 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. 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. Chuckwallas require relatively low humidity levels at, or within 15 to 65%, although they can tolerate slightly more humid

conditions for short periods as well.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Primarily Herbivorous; Chuckwallas are primarily herbivorous, eating fruit, vegetable, flower, and other plant matter with insects and other invertebrates occasionally eaten as well. Diet composition can also vary somewhat depending on the species. In captivity, feed chuckwallas mostly a mixed variety of vegetables and greens including carrots, peas, kale, corn, collard and dandelion greens, mustard greens, and beans. Feed green leaf lettuce sparingly if at all. Some appropriately sized feeder insects such as crickets, roaches, mealworms, superworms, and waxworms can also be given. Several commercially available omnivore mix diets are also available. Feeder insects should be gut-loaded in order to increase their optimal nutritional value. Chuckwallas also require 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) and other growth and nutritional deficiencies. Their feeding frequency will depend on the age, size, and overall health of your animal. Use care as to not overfeed them, 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

As with many reptiles, hatchling and juvenile chuckwallas typically tend to be initially more nervous and defensive. They may gape, hiss, and puff themselves up to appear larger and more intimidating. Handle your chuckwalla gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Some species of chuckwalla, may be slightly more skittish than others, but most adults will settle down considerably and become quite docile, personable, and interactive pets to keep with the correct care and handling.

****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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