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*Photo Credit: Alan Schmierer

Curly Tailed Lizards (*Leiocephalus* spp.) and (*Sternocercus* spp.) Neo-Tropical “Lava” Lizards (*Tropidurus* spp.)

Lizards with Actual Curly Tails

Curly tailed and “lava” lizards can be quite variable in color depending on species, but most species have keeled and pointed dorsal scales that resemble fence lizards or swifts. The most distinctive identifying feature of these species are their tendency to hold their tails in an upward, curled fashion. As with many other species of lizards, curly tailed and lava lizards can also drop their tails through caudal autotomy when threatened or handled roughly, which temporarily startles and/or distracts the predator long enough for the lizard to make its escape. A new tail then regrows over several weeks, but tends to be more vestigial than the original. Curly tailed and lava lizards also will display a variety of social structure behaviors to signal territory, dominance, and courtship including arm waving, head bobbing, and/or pushups. The most commonly kept and imported species for the pet trade are the Northern Curly tailed Lizard (*L. carinatus*), Hispaniolan Masked or Jeweled Curly tailed Lizard (*L. personatus*), and Red sided Curly tailed Lizard (*L. schreibersii*). An additional thirty-some species of “lava” lizards from the genus *Tropidurus* are also recognized. These relatively small lizards can make for hardy, inexpensive, and spirited pet reptiles for the beginning enthusiast.

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: Leiocephalidae

Genus: *Leiocephalus*, *Sternocercus*, and *Tropidurus*

Species: *Leiocephalus* spp.*, *Sternocercus* spp., and *Tropidurus* spp.*

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, curly tailed and lava lizards can attain longevity of at least 5 to 8 years or more.

Distribution and Habitat

Curly tailed lizards consist of a genus of approximately 30 species endemic to the Caribbean, including the Bahama Islands, Cayman Islands, Cuba, and Honduras. The closely related, neo-tropical, “lava” lizards are also broadly distributed elsewhere on continental South America, depending on the exact species. They are also frequently introduced into some southern areas of the United States such as Florida as well. Within this range, curly tailed lizards occupy primarily terrestrial to semi-arboreal environments, including tropical to subtropical rainforests and woodlands to drier, more xeric uplands or forests, as well as coastal areas, residential, and agricultural areas, where they are active, primarily diurnal and terrestrial lizards that will seek refuge in burrows, low or ground vegetation, rocky crevices, tree bark, and other forms of shelter, cover, or debris.

Origin/History

Leiocephalus spp. Gray, 1827; *Stenocercus* spp. A.M.C. Duméril & Bibron, 1837; *Tropidurus* spp. Wied-Neuwied, 1824. The many species and subspecies would each have their own authors first describing them during other years.

Various species of curly-tailed and lava lizards have been common imports for the pet trade for many decades. The earliest known establishment of the Northern Curlytail Lizard *Leiocephalus carinatus* in Florida was in 1935 due to zoo escapees; however, other various species of these lizards were reported from the pet trade occurred throughout the decades from the 1970’s through the 2000’s.

Experience Level Required

Novice/Beginner.

Size

Curly tailed lizards and lava lizards are somewhat small lizards that typically reach 4.0 to 10.0 inches in total snout to tail length depending on the genera and species. Snout to vent length in the various species of *Leiocephalus* spp. range from about 2.0 to 7.8 inches snout to vent length (SVL), depending on the exact species. Snout-to-vent length of *Tropidurus* spp. ranges from about 2.3 to 5.3 inches snout-to-vent length (SVL), depending on the species.

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial to Semi-Arboreal. Housing must be sealed and escape proof. These lizards are active, diurnal lizards that require a minimum of a 20 to 30 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Multiple animals that are housed together must have accordingly larger accommodations, although males especially, are territorial. Curly tailed or lava lizards should be maintained on substrates that retain moderate humidity, such as cypress mulch, sphagnum moss, and/or orchid bark or play sand mixture substrates, although some species can tolerate dryer or less humid conditions. For water, moderate humidity levels should be kept up. Mist hatchlings and juveniles at least twice per day and adults at least 2 to 3 times weekly as well as their food. Maintain at about 60% humidity in general. A small, shallow water bowl can also be provided. These lizards will also climb, but are not overly arboreal. Provide artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, slabs, or logs for ample basking, climbing, and hiding opportunities.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Curly tailed and lava lizards will also bask, and thus a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure with an appropriate sized under tank heating pad, ceramic, or radiant heat emitter should be provided. Being from relatively cooler cloud forests, ideal temperatures for these lizards range from 75 to 80 degrees F as an ambient temperature and around 90 to 95 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 curly tailed lizards 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. Curly tailed and lava lizards should be maintained at relatively low to moderate humidity levels at, or within about 30 to 55%, although this may vary somewhat depending on the species.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Primarily Insectivorous; In the wild, curly tailed and lava lizards are primarily insectivorous, feeding on small insects and other invertebrates. Curly tailed and lava lizards in captivity can be given a variety of feeder insects and other invertebrates of appropriate size, frequency, and proportion at least two to three times weekly. Feeder crickets, mealworms, waxworms, roaches, and other feeder insects, as well as some greens, fruits, and vegetable material such as dandelion greens and some commercially available omnivore and mixed fruit and vegetable diets can also be provided. They can also occasionally be given small pre-killed rodents of appropriate size, but sparingly. Providing calcium and vitamin D3 supplementation, as well as nutritional gutloading any feeder insects in these lizard's diets is essential for their health and well-being. 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 that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Handling

Curly tailed and lava lizards can be handled or restrained for short periods of time, but are typically not an overly suitable hands on species that tolerates frequent and/or prolonged handling. Too much handling will stress these species, and they are better maintained overall as a more hands off animal whenever possible.

****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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