



*Photo Credit: Gary Nafis.

Leopard Lizards (*Gambelia* spp.)

Miniature Leopards of the New World in More Ways Than One

Leopard lizards are a genus of relatively small, terrestrial iguanid lizards indigenous to the arid to semi-arid regions of the western and southwestern United States, as well as northern Mexico. The most commonly encountered species in the pet trade are the Long nosed leopard lizards (*G. wislizenii*), although other species also include the Mexican or Cope's leopard lizard (*G. copei*), and Blunt nosed leopard lizard (*G. silus*). They are relatively small iguanid lizards that can be quite variable in coloration and patterning depending on the species, but most generally have granular scalation on a ground color of white, cream colored, grayish, tan, yellowish-brown, or light brown with larger, darker irregular grayish, brownish, to black spots, streaks, or bars along the dorsal surface, sides, and tail. Juvenile lizards are often more highly colored and contrasted than adults, although during the breeding season, both males and females will also develop rusty reddish to reddish orange coloration along the ventral surface, back and sides, and/or reddish-orange spots and streaks along their bodies as well. Leopard lizards are typically active, diurnal species that are also quick and agile predators of smaller invertebrates, reptiles, and amphibians, often utilizing stalking and ambushing behavior. Once they are close enough, leopard lizards will live up to their namesake by capturing prey through rapid pouncing or bursts of speed. While not commonly bred in captivity, leopard lizards are underrated species to keep in the pet trade, and can make for hardy and beautiful captives for the intermediate level 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: Iguanidae

Subfamily: Crotaphytinae

Genus: *Gambelia*

Species: *Gambelia* spp.*

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

Provided the correct care and husbandry, leopard lizards can be expected to live for at least 8 to 10 years or more.

Distribution and Habitat

Leopard lizards are a unique genus of primarily terrestrial lizards indigenous to the western to southwestern United States, and into northern Mexico, depending upon the species and subspecies. Within this range, leopard lizards occupy primarily terrestrial to semi-arboreal environments, including , including rocky, semi-arid deserts, open dry to deciduous forests and woodlands, scrublands, to savannahs, grasslands, and even suburban areas where they use burrows, rocks, logs, tree trunks, downed or low vegetation and other debris on or near the ground to thermoregulate, forage, and seek refuge.

Origin/History

Gambelia spp. Baird, 1859. Specific species would have other authors first describing them during other years.

Unfortunately, there is no information available as to when leopard lizards (Gambelia spp.) first entered the pet trade, although most were, and probably still are wild-collected.

Experience Level Required

Novice/Beginner to Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Leopard lizards are sexually dimorphic species, with females reaching larger sizes than males. Females can reach up to 5.5 to 6.5 inches snout to vent length (SVL), while males reach 3.5 to 5.8 inches snout to vent length (SVL). Total snout-to-tail length ranges from about 7.0 to 12.0 inches.

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial. Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Young leopard lizards can be housed in a 10 to 15 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult leopard lizards are active, foraging lizards that require a minimum of a 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. Unlike many other lizards, leopard lizards are not territorial, and can be housed communally with the proper amount of space, although they should still be closely monitored around feeding. They may also be housed communally with other species from their range such as collard lizards, desert iguanas, or chuckwallas provided adequate resources. Both hatchling and adult leopard lizards will do well on a substrate of 8 to 12 inches of slightly moistened play sand or crushed walnut shell substrates to allow for digging and constructing their own retreats. Avoid using reptile bark bedding or substrates that result in high humidity. Provide a shallow water dish or bowl in the enclosure, and change or clean at least two to three times weekly or whenever dirtied. Provide additional live or artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, or logs for ample basking, climbing, and hiding opportunities as well.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

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 leopard lizards range from 80 to 85 degrees F on the cool side and around 105 to 110 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 leopard 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. Leopard lizards should be maintained at low relative humidity levels at, or within about 30 to 40%, although this may vary somewhat with the exact species.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Insectivorous to Carnivorous; In the wild, leopard lizards are insectivorous to carnivorous. They will eat a variety of insects and other invertebrates, and will also pursue and consume smaller vertebrates as well. Feed leopard lizards in captivity daily to every other day appropriately sized feeder crickets, mealworms, roaches, superworms, and waxworms or other feeder insects/invertebrates. Gut load these prey items by feeding them commercially available diets for added nutritional value and for their optimal health and well-being. Leopard lizards may also eat small pre-killed rodents of appropriate size as well, but feed them these sparingly, if at all. As with other lizards, food can be given to leopard lizards using a bowl or dish. It is also important to provide calcium and vitamin D3 supplements in leopard lizard diets for their added health, wellness, and nutrition. 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

Leopard lizards may initially be nervous and skittish lizards prone to biting, and can be fast and powerful jumpers as well, but captive bred or born individuals or those that become handled regularly can become very docile and personable pets that provide an alternative to more common species. Handle your leopard lizard gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal.

****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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Disclaimer: Note that the information provided in these, or any care sheets, are not intended to be all-exhaustive, and further research and care should always be sought and provided when it comes to any species one may prospectively be interested in. These care sheets are also not intended to serve as substitutes for professional veterinary medical care and husbandry should any animal require it. Always seek proper and professional veterinary care for any animal should the need arise, and be prepared ahead of time for any and all husbandry costs and expenses that may occur with any animal beyond the initial purchase. Any animal owned is ultimately a matter of personal/individual care and responsibility. We cannot make any claims or guarantees regarding any information in this care sheet therein. This care sheet may be reprinted or redistributed only in its entirety.

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