



**Photo Credit: Rushenb*

Mountain Horned Dragons (*Acanthosaura* spp.)

Horns of the Mountains

Mountain horned dragons are small to mid-sized agamid lizards that are also known as the mountain horned lizards, pricklenapes, or pricklenape agamas. Mountain horned dragons can be quite variable in color, ranging from green, brown or olive brown, greenish gray or olive gray, blackish, yellowish to greenish yellow, to sometimes orangish. The most distinguishing identifying feature of this genus are their low nuchal crests and spines located on the back of the head and nape (or neck) and sometimes a dorsal line of spines as well. Mountain horned dragons are a highly arboreal genus of agamids, most often being found in the canopies and dense vegetation located in higher altitudes and mountain forests within their above mentioned range. Many mountain horned dragons are still wild collected or imported, although captive breeding of *A. capra* in particular has been successful. Mountain horned dragons are a unique, and personable group of agamids that can be kept and propagated readily in captivity, are fairly inexpensive, and can make great and enjoyable pet reptile species for the novice-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: Agamidae

Subfamily: Draconinae

Genus: *Acanthosaura*

Species: *Acanthosaura* spp.*

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

Longevity in the wild is not yet fully understood, but captive mountain horned dragons can attain longevity of at least 5 to 10 years or potentially more.

Species

Mountain horned dragons are relatively small to medium sized agamid lizards consisting of about 10 to 12 species, with the Mountain Horned Dragon, *Acanthosaura capra* and less commonly, the Masked Horned Tree Dragon, *Acanthosaura crucigera* being the most commonly kept and seen species in the pet trade.

Distribution and Habitat

The mountain horned dragons, or pricklenapes, are a very widely distributed genus of agamid lizards over much of southern, southeastern, eastern, and east central Asia, depending on the species. More specifically, species in genus can generally occur in China, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Within their ranges, these unique lizards prefer tropical to sub-tropical, higher elevation habitats with dense vegetation such as tropical rainforests, forests and woodlands, plantations, and irrigated croplands and other agricultural areas with access to flowing water bodies nearby including marshes and swamplands, rivers, streams, and their banks, and other similar wetlands. These lizards are arboreal to semi-arboreal, spending much of their time in the lower canopy to understory brush and vegetation.

Origin/History

Acanthosaura spp. Gray, 1831. Specific species would have other first describing authors and years attributed to them.

It is not known when mountain horned dragons were first kept or imported for the pet trade, although they may have been since at least the 1980's or 1990's. Unfortunately, most of the that still are available in today's pet trade are wild caught, usually carrying a heavy parasite load, stressed, and in poor health.

Experience Level Required

Novice/Beginner to Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Adult mountain horned dragon species can vary in size depending on the exact species, as well as sex and age of the animal. Most average snout-to-tail lengths range from about 7.5 to 15.0 inches. Adults average about 4.0 to 6.5 inches in snout-to-vent length (SVL).

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Arboreal. Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Hatchling or juvenile dragons can be housed in a 10 to 15 gallon tall terrarium or enclosure. A single adult mountain horned dragon can be maintained in a minimum of a 20 to 30 gallon "tall" front or top opening terrarium. Mountain horned dragons can be housed together in pairs of the same species, but increasingly larger housing should be provided accordingly. Adult males should not be housed together however as they are territorial. For substrate, these dragons will require a medium that can retain higher humidity such as pesticide free potting soil, cypress mulch, coconut husk bedding, orchid bark, or sphagnum moss. A large, shallow water bowl or dish should also be provided and be changed and cleaned regularly. Many of the commercially available misters or foggers can also help maintain adequate hydration for these lizards as well since they will also acquire much of their hydration from the moisture and condensation on their bodies as well as surrounding vegetation. Mountain horned dragons are arboreal lizards, and appreciate additional climbing, basking, and hiding opportunities. Provide vertical and horizontal artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, logs or branches and other perches. A variety of live or planted vivarium plants and/or mosses can also provide additional naturalistic basking and hiding areas, and help raise and maintain humidity levels these agamids require at about 60 to 80% humidity overall.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Mountain horned dragons originate from cooler, mountain or higher altitude areas, and this natural history should be considered when providing basking and ambient heating temperatures for them. For basking, create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure. Ideal ambient and cool side temperatures for mountain horned dragons range from 75 to 85 degrees F and approximately 90 degrees F on the warm, basking side. Under tank heating pads, ceramic heat emitters, and/or infrared bulbs will help maintain adequate ambient temperatures. Exceeding these basking temperatures by much more will not be tolerated by these lizards, which may become heat stressed as a result. Relatively cooler temperatures and high humidity are key to maintaining mountain horned dragons. Nighttime temperatures can be allowed to drop to 65 to 75 degrees F. A day and night photoperiod or light cycle of 10 to 12 hours should also be given. 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 mountain horned dragons 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.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Insectivorous to Omnivorous; In the wild, mountain horned dragons are primarily insectivorous, although they will eat both plant and animal matter. They will eat an assortment of insects and other invertebrates, fruit and vegetable material, and even other small vertebrates on occasion. In captivity, mountain horned dragons will readily accept a variety of appropriately sized feeder insects including but not limited to crickets, mealworms, superworms, feeder roaches, and waxworms. Gut load these prey items by feeding them commercially available diets for added nutritional value. Mountain horned dragons may also accept other prey items such as newborn small pre-killed rodents, earthworms, redworms, and feeder goldfish or other small feeder fish, but feed them these sparingly. Mountain horned dragons can be given these food items from a securely fastened arboreal perch or dish daily to every other day. Gutloading insect food items and providing sufficient calcium, multivitamin, and vitamin D3 supplements in mountain horned dragon diets helps raise their nutritional value and should be used to supplement the diets of any age or size of 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

As with many reptiles, younger, or hatchling mountain horned dragons often tend to be, at least initially, more nervous and defensive, but usually tend to become mild mannered and docile as adults, and can be readily handled or interacted with. Handle any age or size of mountain horned dragon gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. As they become older, Mountain horned dragons may be more likely to calm down more and be able to be handled, but they are still not quite as handleable as a bearded dragon, for example, and can still be sometimes be somewhat nervous and jumpy.

****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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