



*\*Photo Credit: Paul Bodnar.*

## Oustalet's or Malagasy Giant Chameleon (*Furcifer oustaleti*)

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The Malagasy Giant Chameleon, also known as the Oustalet's Chameleon, is a large Old World species of chameleon endemic to the island of Madagascar, where they can occur throughout the island in a wide variety of habitats. They are also introduced in several other areas of the world as well, including in Kenya of eastern Africa, as well as in southern Florida in the United States. The Oustalet's chameleon can be highly variable in color, with adult males usually being varying shades of gray or brown, sometimes with reddish or reddish orange around their heads and limbs. Females are more colorful and variable in colors and patterns than males, with much more variable colors and patterns of reds, yellows, and/or greens or sometimes blues. Oustalet's chameleons are one of the largest species of chameleons in the world, rivaling the Meller's and Parson's chameleons in size.

Chameleons in general are a highly diverse and specialized family of Old World lizards with several extremely unique features and adaptations for survival. Perhaps best known are their color and/or pattern changing abilities. The skin and scales of chameleons possesses a thin, superficial layer of color changing pigments, with another deeper layer consisting of guanine cells. In order to change their coloration, chameleons rely on changing the space and distance between these guanine cells, thereby changing the wavelengths of light reflected from the skin and scales. While it is popularly believed that chameleons change their colors and patterns for camouflage or crypsis, and while it is true that this has functions in concealing the animal from predators and prey, this is not the primary reason for their color changes. Instead, they will change color as a means of social signaling, to display territoriality and dominance, displaying defensive behaviors, and/or to aid in thermoregulation. Most chameleons also have highly specialized zygodactylus feet and prehensile tails for climbing and gripping branches as well. They also have highly modified and rapidly extrudable sticky tongues used and designed for capturing prey. Chameleons also possess a pair of highly mobile, independently operating eyes, giving them excellent depth perception and motor coordination as well. These are only some of the many unique features chameleons possess, making them popular and unusual pet reptiles to maintain in herpetoculture.

### **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:** Chamaeleonidae

**Genus:** Furcifer

**Species:** *Furcifer oustaleti*\*

*\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

### **Lifespan and Longevity**

If provided the proper care, Oustalet's chameleons can attain longevity of 3 to 7 years on average in captivity.

### **Distribution and Habitat**

The Malagasy Giant, or Oustalet's Chameleon is a large species of chameleon endemic predominantly to the island of Madagascar, where they occur throughout the island in a wide variety of habitats. They can be found from dry deciduous forests or woodlands, to more humid tropical evergreen forests, montane savannah, agricultural areas and even urbanized areas and more degraded forests, but is seldom found deeper within forest interiors. A few other introduced populations also occur in Kenya on mainland eastern Africa, as well as in southern Florida of the southeastern United States.

### **Experience Level Required**

Intermediate/Moderate to Advanced.

### **Size**

Adult male Oustalet's or Malagasy giant chameleons can have a maximum snout-to-tail length of up to 27.0 inches, although females are usually smaller, with a maximum snout-to-tail length of up to about 12.0 inches. Average snout-to-vent length can be 11.0 to 20.0 inches (SVL).

### **Housing and Enclosure**

***Enclosure System: Primarily Arboreal.*** Housing must be sealed, well ventilated, and escape proof. Hatchling and juvenile chameleons up to around six to eight months can be maintained in roughly a 20 to 30 gallon tall enclosure or 18" x 18" x 24", but be sure to not use too large of enclosures as they can become stressed and have greater difficulty finding their food. Most adult Oustalet's chameleons should be kept in at least a tall or equivalent sized 24" x 24" x 48" enclosure. Glass or screen enclosures can be used depending on your household's ambient temperature and humidity. Providing a substrate is optional as chameleons are arboreal and will seldom use it, but substrates that can be provided can include cypress mulch, sphagnum moss, chemical and pesticide free potting soils, or coconut fiber. Chameleons are highly arboreal and specialized lizards that require additional climbing, basking, and hiding opportunities by providing additional vertical artificial foliage, driftwood, branches, logs, and other furnishings. Most chameleons also will not recognize standing water, and should be misted, by hand or with a commercially available misting and/or fogging system to ensure they receive adequate moisture and hydration.

### **Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity**

Provide a lighting and temperature gradient for Oustalet's chameleons from 72 to 80 degrees F for ambient temperatures. A basking temperature of about 85 to 95 degrees F. should be provided. Use an infrared night time bulb to create nighttime temperature gradients of 75 to 85 degrees F. 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 these chameleons 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. Maintaining the correct relative humidity is a very important component of chameleon care, and Oustalet's chameleons require moderate levels at, or around 70 to 80% but can go as low as 60%.

### **Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition**

***Insectivorous***; In the wild, Oustalet's chameleons are primarily insectivorous, feeding on insects and other invertebrates they can locate and capture using their specialized eye-sight and long sticky tongues. In captivity, feed these chameleons a variety of appropriately sized feeder insects such as crickets, roaches, mealworms, superworms, and waxworms, but avoid giving them too many fatty insect feeders. Feeder insects should be gut-loaded in order to increase their optimal nutritional value. Oustalet's chameleons 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. Food can be given by hand or in a small dish mounted off of the enclosure's floor for arboreal animals. 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 most chameleons, Oustalet's chameleons will generally not tolerate frequent handling, and it should be kept to low levels. Should a chameleon be handled, it is important to remember to not forcefully pick up the animal, which may lead to further stress and/or injury. Allow a chameleon to walk onto your hands or gently coax them to do so if possible. Generally, chameleons are better suited as display animals.

**\*\*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**

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this animal, group of animals, or this care sheet, please email and contact:

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