



*Sandi and Alex Bingham

European Legless Lizard/Scheltopusik (*Pseudopus apodus*)

The European Snake that Isn't

European legless lizards are a large species of legless lizard that resemble snakes with their elongated, limbless bodies, but possess several notable differences. They are also commonly known as the Scheltopusik, which is derived from Russian terminology for “yellow bellied”. The Scheltopusik is an elongated, legless lizard with a cylindrical body ranging in color from light to dark brown, reddish gray, to greenish gray with a distinctive lateral groove present. Unlike snakes, which the scheltopusik and many other legless lizards are commonly confused with, they have eyelids, external ear openings, and a stiffer, more rigid skeletal structure. Many legless lizard species are also known as “glass lizards” or “glass snakes” (although they are not snakes) due to nearly half of their body being tail that can be detached in caudal autotomy defense.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Lacertilia

Infraorder: Diploglossa

Family: Anguidae

Subfamily: Anguinae

Genus: Pseudopus

Species: *Pseudopus apodus**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care and husbandry, scheltopusiks can reach 10 to 15 years or more in longevity.

Distribution and Habitat

The European legless lizard, or scheltopusik, is a very unusual species of terrestrial, legless lizard indigenous to a fairly broad range of southern Europe to central Asia. More specifically, this species of legless lizard occurs from Greece, coastal Croatia, Macedonia, Albania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Lebanon, and the European Soviet Union, through southern Russia, southern Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Syria. They also occur from Iran and Iraq, through Jordan and Israel, as well as

other European and Asian nations and localities as well. Within this range, these elongated and very unique European glass, or legless lizards occupy primarily terrestrial environments, including open, semi-dry to temperate or semi-temperate grasslands, scrublands, and savannahs to open forests and woodlands, where they use burrows, rocks and rock crevices, logs, tree trunks, downed or low vegetation and other debris on or near the ground to thermoregulate, forage, and seek refuge.

Origin/History

Pseudopus apodus (Pallas, 1775).

It is not known when exactly scheltopusiks were first imported into the U.S. However, in Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark of 1981, they appeared in the “snake pit” scene as “snakes”, so they may have been imported for the film’s set (and generally) as far back as since at least the early 1980’s. To this day, they are still seldom bred in captivity, and most are wild-collected imports.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

The Scheltopusik, or European legless lizard is a large species of legless lizard, reaching up to 4 to 5 feet in length, or about 48.0 to 54.0 inches in total snout-to-tail length. Maximum snout-to-vent length is up to about 19.6 to 24.0 inches snout-to-vent length (SVL).

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial to Semi-Fossorial. Provide a secure, escape proof terrarium or enclosure that is a minimum of a 40 gallon long or similar sized enclosure for one adult scheltopusik. Scheltopusiks can be housed together provided adequate space, food, and other resources are provided. Scheltopusiks will burrow, and should be provided with a loose substrate to allow burrowing such as cypress mulch, chemical and pesticide free potting soil, peat moss, play sand mixtures, or coconut fiber substrates. Scheltopusiks are not necessarily an arboreal species, benefitting more from floor space than height, but can be given branches or other climbing opportunities in the enclosure if desired. Provide sufficient hiding opportunities to feel secure, including log or rock hides, artificial foliage, slabs, and other similar furnishings. A water bowl of sufficient size should also be provided and be changed or cleaned accordingly or otherwise regularly. Soaking them once per week for about 15 to 20 minutes in lukewarm water can also help raise their hydration and humidity.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Scheltopusiks are primarily diurnal, and thus will require UVA and UVB lighting and heating for proper vitamin D3 formation. Overhead incandescent lighting, ceramic heat emitters, nighttime red bulbs, and/or under tank heating elements (UTHs) can all be used to monitor correct temperatures for scheltopusiks. Maintain a thermal gradient in the enclosure for this species from 85 to 90 degrees F. 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 a minimum of 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. Scheltopusisks, or European legless lizards should be maintained at moderate levels of relative humidity overall, at, or within about 50 to 60%.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Primarily Insectivorous to Carnivorous; In the wild, scheltopusiks are primarily carnivorous,

feeding on a variety of insects, worms, crustaceans, mollusks, and other invertebrates. They will also consume smaller vertebrates on occasion as well. In captivity, scheltopusiks will accept a variety of appropriately sized feeder insects including crickets, roaches, mealworms, waxworms, or superworms. Dust feeder insects with vitamin D3 and gutload 1 to 2 times weekly or as otherwise directed for optimal health and development. Feeder insects can be provided by hand or in a small dish. Other food items that may also occasionally be eaten can include appropriately sized pre-killed rodents of appropriate size, strips of raw chicken, or ground beef. All of these items should only be provided sparingly, however. Use care as to not overfeed scheltopusiks, as obesity and other health related issues can become an issue. Their feeding frequency will also depend on the age, size, and overall health of your animal. 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

Scheltopusiks are still not yet widely bred or propagated in captivity, with most still being wild caught or imported animals. They also have more rigid bodies and skeletal structures than snakes (giving them a different feel than most snakes), and are capable of caudal autotomy if threatened or handled roughly. Many specimens will tolerate handling for short durations, but not as readily as many other reptile species however. If interacted with on a regular basis however, scheltopusiks can become very intriguing and personable pets to maintain that make for a very unique addition for the intermediate level enthusiast or pet owner.

****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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