



*Brittany Kay

Spiny Tailed Iguanas (*Ctenosaura* spp.); Black, Mexican, Club Tailed

Extremely Diverse Iguanas

Spiny tailed iguanas are small to large species of iguana that can vary greatly in size, color and pattern depending on species. They may range in color from grayish white, tan, brown, to grayish brown, sometimes with several dark vertical bands or stripes. There is also a low row of dorsal spines on most species from behind the head to their tail or hind quarters. The most diagnostic feature of these iguanas are their spiny, keeled scales on the tail. Like some other lizards, in addition to having keen vision allowing them to detect predators, these iguanas also have a vestigial third eye atop their heads that detect changes in overhead light, and which act as photosensory organs. These iguanas are a semi-arboreal species, where they will often bask, thermoregulate, and forage for food both in trees and vegetation, as well as on the ground often near water. As with many other lizards, iguanas also utilize a variety of behavioral traits as defensive mechanisms to avoid predation or being eaten, as well as to signal territory, dominance, disposition, and in sexual displays, and these behaviors can include head bobbing, extending their throat dewlaps, gaping and hissing, and other such forms of posturing.

Popular species in the pet trade include the Black Spiny Tailed Iguana (*C. similis*), Club Tailed Iguana (*C. quinquecarinata*), and Mexican Spiny Tailed Iguana (*C. pectinata*). ***As with other iguanas, one must research these species' potential adult size, husbandry, and housing needs beforehand. Given proper care, spiny tailed iguanas can live for 15 to 25 years or more. Iguana husbandry is not simple by any means, and this care sheet should not be considered complete or exhaustive, but rather a starting guide to the essentials and the basics. Please see the additional resources and information for far more detailed aspects of spiny tailed iguana husbandry.***

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

Genus: Ctenosaura

Species: *Ctenosaura spp.**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

Given proper care and husbandry, spiny tailed iguanas can reach longevity for 15 to 25 years or more in captivity.

Distribution and Habitat

The spiny tailed iguanas are a large genus of relatively small to large, arboreal to semi arboreal iguanas indigenous to, and widely distributed over much of Central and South America, depending upon the exact species. More specifically, species within this genus of iguanas can range from the extreme southwestern United States along Baja, California and the Gulf of California, northern, western, and eastern, to southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and its surrounding islands, to El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, and to Colombia in South America. Some species are also introduced in some other areas of the world, including Florida and Hawaii of the U.S., the Bahamas, and other locales in the Caribbean. Within this broad range, these iguanas can occur in a variety of dry, arid to semi-arid, tropical to sub-tropical environments. These species prefer open, dry, rocky coastlines and coastal areas, open forests and woodlands to scrub forests, semi-deserts and scrublands, plantations, and agricultural and residential areas with ample rock and tree cover for thermoregulating, foraging, and avoiding predation.

Origin/History

Ctenosaura ssp. Wiegmann, 1828; *Ctenosaura quinquecarinata* (Gray, 1842); *Ctenosaura similis* (Gray, 1831); *Ctenosaura pectinata* (Wiegmann, 1834) would be the most common of the *Ctenosaura* species.

The Black Spiny-tailed Iguana (*Ctenosaura similis*), native to Mexico and Central America, was first introduced into southern Florida in 1979 likely via the pet trade, and subsequently established populations on both the Gulf and Atlantic Coasts (Krysko et al. 2003, 2009; Avery et al. 2014). This suggests that *Ctenosaura* have been present in the pet trade for many decades since at least the 1960's or 1970's.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate to Advanced.

Size

Hatchling spiny tailed iguanas begin at approximately 12.0 to 18.0 inches or smaller in total snout-to-tail length. Depending on the species, adult spiny tailed iguanas can range from 10.0 to 12.0 inches in the smallest species, although most range within about 2 ½ to 5 feet, or 30.0 to 60.0 inches in snout-to-tail length, depending on the exact species. Females of most species are slightly smaller than the males. Average snout-to-vent length also varies depending on the species; however, for *Ctenosaura similis*, 1.69 to 2.36 inches snout-to-vent length (SVL) in hatchlings, or from 13.7 to 19.6 inches snout-to-vent length (SVL).

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Semi-Arboreal to Arboreal. Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Younger or smaller iguanas 18" or less can be maintained in a minimum of a three foot by two foot by two foot enclosure, but will outgrow these accommodations and require accordingly larger housing. Larger iguanas should be housed in a minimum of a four to six foot enclosure by at least three feet by about six feet. Custom designed enclosures are available as well, and are

perhaps the best choices for maintaining most large iguana species in. Acceptable substrates for spiny tailed iguanas can include coconut fibers, orchid bark, or chemical and pesticide free topsoil or potting soil. Spiny tailed iguanas are semi-arboreal lizards, and will climb when provided the opportunity. They require sufficient enclosure height with ample basking, and climbing spaces including sturdy branches, shelves, and other perches. Humidity levels should also be kept at relatively lower levels with this species at around 40 to 60%, although this may vary somewhat on the exact species. Younger iguanas may require additional retreats such as hide boxes, log or rock hides, or artificial foliage to feel secure. A sturdy, easily cleaned and disinfected food, water, and litter dish should all also be provided as well. Many iguanas can even become litter trained with some time and patience. Although adult spiny tailed iguanas derive most of their hydration from their foods, also be sure to provide a supplemental water periodically as well in the form of a large water dish or pan. For added hydration and humidity, these iguanas can also be misted and/or soaked in lukewarm water for at least 15 to 20 minutes weekly as well.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

For basking, create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure. Ideal ambient temperatures would be 75 to 85 degrees F, with a basking temperature of about 95 to 105 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 spiny tailed iguanas 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. Do not allow your iguana to come into contact with any heating element. 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. *More detailed housing and enclosure recommendations for spiny tailed iguanas and other large lizards that are beyond the scope of this care sheet can and should be researched further by any prospective pet owner.*

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Herbivorous to Omnivorous; In the wild, spiny tailed iguanas are primarily omnivorous, feeding on a variety of plant materials including leafy greens, flowers, fruits, vegetable matter, and occasionally insects or other invertebrates and other small vertebrates. As with other iguanas, spiny tailed iguanas have a large variety of dietary requirements that should be met if kept in captivity. Many commercialized iguana diets are available, and can be used. Chopped, store bought fruits and vegetables are also typically relished by these iguanas, and can include mustard greens, collard and turnip greens, green beans, kale, squash, sweet potatoes, carrots, as well as many other choices and mixed greens. Feeder insects and other invertebrates that can be provide can include appropriately sized crickets, roaches, silkworms, hornworms, mealworms, and waxworms. Small, frozen-thawed rodents will also occasionally be eaten as well, but offer these sparingly. Pesticide, or chemical free dandelions and other select weeds can also be given. Absolutely avoid diets high in protein, as such diets can and do lead to gout, renal disease, and other disorders seen in iguanas. Calcium and vitamin D3 supplements are very important as part of a healthy spiny tailed iguana diet. Without the proper diet and amounts of nutrients and supplementation, all iguana species can be very susceptible to Metabolic Bone Disease (or MBD), a debilitating bone and growth disorder, other health and nutritional maladies, or even death in extremely severe cases. Feeding frequency depends on age, size, and overall health of the animal, but typically should be at minimum every other day. 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

Many spiny tailed iguanas may be skittish and/or irascible animals to maintain, particularly wild caught animals, although captive bred and born animals can become much more traceable and handleable. Spiny tailed iguanas are animals that require gentle, deliberate, and regular handling in order to become accustomed to being handled. As hatchlings, these iguanas are typically not aggressive, but can be somewhat delicate and skittish initially, and should be handled carefully to prevent injury. Larger and older iguanas can be safely handled using a variety of techniques that adequately support the animal's weight distribution and/or that restrain movements if needed or depending on the disposition of the animal to be handled. A captive born and raised spiny tailed iguana can become a very docile and personable adult animal to maintain. However, other specimens, such as male iguanas can become aggressive and territorial and require much more careful and experienced handling. ***More detailed handling techniques for these iguanas and other large lizards that are beyond the scope of this care sheet can and should be researched further.***

****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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