

Blue Tongued Skinks (*Tiliqua spp*) Care Plan

Blue tongued skinks are terrestrial lizards from Australasia and Indonesia. The numerous different species are found variously in open woodland, forest-field margins and semi-desert habitats.

The species most commonly kept as pets include *T. gigas* (New Guinea Blue-tongued skink), *T. s. scincoides* (Common or Eastern Blue-tongued skink) and *T. s. intermedia* (Northern Blue-tongued skink).

They are heavily built lizards with broad, blunt triangular heads, delicate limbs and deep blue tongues which are used as a defence mechanism. They can grow up to 50-60cm in length and live up to 20 years.

Suitability as Pets

These reptiles are very rewarding to keep and have a very long life expectancy. However their trade threatens their future and so they should only be kept by competent experienced keepers

Housing

Blue tongued skinks need large secure vivariums with the correct temperature gradient and places to hide. It is essential that vivarium temperature and humidity are monitored to ensure that this lizard is living in the correct environment for the species. The vivarium should be spot-cleaned regularly and completely cleaned and disinfected every 2 months.

Lighting

Blue tongued skinks need ultraviolet B light for vitamin D synthesis and calcium metabolism. While this is best provided by access to natural sunlight, this is obviously not a practical option in Britain. Light sources such as Iguana light, Reptisun (Zoomed) or Life-glo lights are the best alternatives. They must be replaced regularly as their UVB output declines rapidly after 6-9 months. A 12/12 hour day/night photoperiod should be provided as these lizards are diurnal.

Heating/ Temperature

Their preferred optimum temperature zone (POTZ) is 25-34°C. To stimulate appetite and digest their food, bearded dragons should have access to a basking area that remains at 30-35°C for 12 hours a day. The rest of the enclosure should have a temperature gradient from 30-35°C at the hot spot to 24°C at the coolest area during the day. Vivarium temperatures can drop by a few degrees at night time but should not drop below 16°C (20°C for juveniles)

A temperature gradient can be achieved by placing a heat mat under or against the side of the vivarium at one end. Alternatively ceramic bulbs, spot lights or power plates can be used, although it is essential that heaters inside the vivarium are guarded to prevent direct contact by the animal. Some form of basking lamp should be provided whichever other heating methods are used. Use a thermostat to control the heat system if possible. Hot rocks are not recommended.

Furniture (Climbing and shelter)

Substrates such as sand, bark or wood chips and corn cobs should be avoided as they can be ingested causing fatal impactions. Newspaper is probably the easiest thing to use as it can be replaced regularly. Rocks or logs can be used to create hiding places or purpose built hide boxes can be used.

Water /Humidity

Humidity should be 20-30% with access to an area of higher humidity during shedding. This can be achieved by providing a small humidity chamber. This can be made out of a plastic ice cream or margarine tub containing damp vermiculite, moss or wet paper towels. The vivarium should be sprayed with water at least daily. A shallow water dish should be available and cleaned daily.

Diet / Feeding

Blue-tongued skinks are omnivorous, eating a large proportion of insects. Crickets, mealworms, locusts, cockroaches and wax worms are all suitable.

Adults may take an occasional pinky mouse. Dog food may be offered as part of the diet, although this should not become the main food item offered. A small amount of vegetable matter (this should comprise approximately 25% of the diet) should be offered daily with components well mixed and in bite-sized pieces. This should also be regularly dusted with Nutrobal (Vetark).

Suitable vegetables include dandelion (including flowers), clover, watercress, mustard cress, parsley, kohlrabi, escarole, collard, turnip greens, endive, Chinese leaves, carrot tops, green beans, peas (and pods), mange-tout, bean sprouts, grated carrot, sweet potato, peppers, and sweetcorn. Vegetables should be shredded, grated or finely chopped and mixed thoroughly together.

Adults should be fed every 1-2 days; juveniles require feeding twice daily with smaller prey items. When feeding juveniles, it is a good idea to place crickets in the fridge for a few minutes first, to slow them down. Remove any uneaten crickets from the vivarium.

Food Dusting/ Vitamin Supplementation

In order to ensure that the diet has a correct calcium : phosphorus ratio, prey insects should be gut-loaded with a product such as Bug-Grub (Vetark) for 48 hours before feeding. They should also be regularly dusted with a high calcium product such as Nutrobal (Vetark) before feeding. Juveniles should have their prey dusted daily whereas adults should have their prey dusted weekly.

Preventative Care & Disease Management

Always wash your hands (preferably with an antiseptic soap) before or after handling any reptile. For animals in veterinary environment we advise the use of disposable gloves (to control RAS).

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Quarantine new reptiles for at least 3 months. During this time record normal patterns of eating, defaecating, weight gain and behaviour and have them examined by a vet.

It is a good idea to take along a fresh faecal sample so that the vet can check for the presence of gastrointestinal parasites.

Veterinary advice should be sought if your chameleon is not eating or producing faeces, is inactive, has swellings, particularly around the eyes, is losing weight or has a discharge from its eyes, nose or mouth.

Accidents and injuries can happen, both to the reptile and the reptile handler. Not only can bites happen, but also there are diseases that can be transmitted between animals - and that means between reptiles and humans.

Keepers should be ware of the prevention of reptile associated salmonellosis (RAS).

Good hygiene is essential, not only to your pet's health, but to your own.

Reptiles can be non- symptomatic carriers of Salmonella, bacteria that cause sometimes lethal food poisoning.

Children, the aged, and those who are immune-compromised are particularly susceptible to Salmonella from any source.

There are measures you can take to minimize risk:

- After handling your pet reptile, wash your hands with soap for at least 30 seconds, or use hand disinfectant.
- Disinfect any area you used to clean cages, dishes and do not use this area for food preparation.
- Use separate cleaning utensils, not the sponge you use to wash your own dishes.
- Reptiles are NOT recommended if you're pregnant or have a young child or an immuno-compromised person in your home.
- Don't kiss a reptile pet.