GENERAL

keeping a blue tongue lizard

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Keeping a Blue Tongue Lizard: A Complete Guide to Care, Housing, and Health

Blue tongue lizards (Bichiridae) are among the most popular and charismatic reptiles for experienced keepers. Their bold colors, friendly temperament, and relatively low maintenance make them a top choice for hobbyists who want a pet that is both fascinating and approachable. Yet, like any exotic animal, they require a specific set of conditions to thrive. This guide covers every aspect of keeping a blue tongue lizard, from choosing the right enclosure and temperature regime to feeding, handling, and preventing common health issues.

1. Understanding Blue Tongue Lizards

1.1 Taxonomy and Species

Blue tongue lizards belong to the family *Varanidae* and the genus *Varanus*. The most common species kept in captivity is the *Varanus boehmei* (Böhme's blue tongue), but others such as *Varanus albigularis* (white throated blue tongue) and *Varanus brevirostris* (short snouted blue tongue) are also kept by dedicated hobbyists. Each species varies slightly in size, color, and care needs, so it's essential to identify the exact species you plan to keep.

1.2 Natural Habitat and Behavior

Native to the arid and semi arid regions of Australia, blue tongue lizards spend most of their time basking in the sun on rocky outcrops or sandy soils. They are diurnal, meaning they're active during the day and rest at night. Their diet in the wild consists primarily of insects, small mammals, and occasionally carrion. In captivity, they can be fed a mix of live insects, protein powders, and occasional fruits or vegetables.

1.3 Size and Lifespan

Adult blue tongue lizards can reach lengths of 60–70 cm (24–28 inches) and weigh 2–4 kg (4–9 lbs), depending on the species. They have a relatively long lifespan, often living 10–12 years in captivity when provided with proper care. This longevity underscores the importance of planning a long term commitment before bringing one home.

2. Habitat Requirements

2.1 Temperature and Humidity

Blue tongue lizards require a warm, stable environment. A basking spot of 35–38 /°C (95–100 /°F) and a cooler side of 28–30 °C (82–86 °F) is ideal. During cooler months or in cooler climates, you may need supplemental heat lamps to maintain these temperatures. Humidity should be kept moderate, around 40–60%, to mimic their natural environment and aid in shedding.

2.2 Light and Day Night Cycle

Providing a natural light cycle is crucial for the lizard's circadian rhythm. A 12:12 hour light/dark cycle works well, with UVB lighting for at least 10–12 hours each day. UVB exposure is essential for calcium metabolism, preventing metabolic bone disease. Use a UVB bulb rated for reptiles and replace it every 6–12 months, as its potency declines over time.

3. Enclosure Setup

3.1 Size and Shape

For a single adult, a minimum enclosure size of 120 /× /60 /× /60 /cm (48 /× /24 /× /24 inches) is recommended. This provides enough space for climbing, basking, and hiding. A taller enclosure (60 cm or more) encourages natural climbing behavior and reduces the risk of injury.

3.2 Substrate Options

- Reptile Sand: Mimics natural terrain and aids in shedding.
- Coconut Fiber: Easy to clean and retains moisture.
- Paper Towels: Low maintenance but less natural.

Avoid loose soil or peat moss, as they can become contaminated with bacteria. Change the substrate at least once a month or when it becomes visibly soiled.

3.3 Hiding Places and Enrichment

Provide several hiding spots such as:

- Hollow logs or branches
- Commercial reptile caves
- PVC pipes with a small entrance

Incorporate climbing branches, rocks, and a shallow water dish (not too deep). This enrichment encourages natural behaviors and reduces stress.

4. Temperature & Lighting Setup

4.1 Heating Equipment

- Heat Lamp: Use an incandescent or halogen lamp for basking. Monitor with a surface thermometer.
- Under Tank Heater: Helps maintain a warm base temperature.
- Thermostat: Automates temperature control and prevents overheating.

4.2 UVB Lighting

Install a UVB bulb on the opposite side of the basking lamp to ensure even exposure. A 10 W or 12 W bulb is typically sufficient for a 120 × 60 cm enclosure. Position the bulb so the lizard can comfortably bask without being forced to stand in a hot spot.

5. Diet & Nutrition

5.1 Protein Sources

Feed a variety of insects such as crickets, mealworms, and dubia roaches. Offer a protein mix of 30–40% for juveniles and 20–30% for adults. Dust insects with a calcium supplement (no vitamin D3) before feeding.

5.2 Calcium and Vitamin Supplements

- Calcium Powder: 2–3 times a week.
- Vitamin D3: Only if UVB light is insufficient.

5.3 Occasional Treats

Provide fruit and vegetable snacks sparingly (e.g., blueberries, carrot sticks). Avoid sugary or acidic foods that can cause digestive upset.

5.4 Feeding Schedule

1. Juveniles: 3–4 meals per week.
2. Adults: 2–3 meals per week.
3. Always offer fresh water and change it daily.

6. Health & Hygiene

6.1 Regular Check ups

Inspect the lizard daily for signs of stress, injury, or illness. Look for:

- Unusual swelling or discoloration
- Loss of appetite
- Difficulty shedding
- Respiratory discharge or wheezing

6.2 Shedding Care

Blue tongue lizards shed their skin annually. Provide a shallow water dish for soaking, and increase humidity slightly during shedding periods. If shedding is incomplete, gently wipe the area with a damp cloth.

6.3 Parasite Management

Regularly clean the enclosure and inspect for parasites such as mites or ticks. Use reptile safe treatments if parasites are detected. Keep the lizard's environment clean to reduce infestation risk.

7. Behavior & Handling

7.1 Social Interaction

Blue tongue lizards are solitary by nature. They should be housed alone to prevent aggression or stress. If you plan to keep multiple lizards, ensure each has its own enclosure.

7.2 Handling Techniques

1. Wash your hands thoroughly before and after handling.
2. Support the lizard's body with both hands, keeping the head and tail in the center.
3. Never hold the lizard by the tail; this can cause injury.
4. Limit handling to short periods (5–10 minutes) to avoid stress.

7.3 Training and Bonding

Gradual, positive reinforcement can help your lizard become more comfortable with handling. Use small treats and gentle voice tones to build trust.

8. Common Health Issues

8.1 Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD)

Caused by insufficient calcium or UVB exposure. Symptoms include bone deformities, lethargy, and poor appetite. Prevention: Adequate UVB lighting, calcium supplementation, and proper diet.

8.2 Respiratory Infections

Often due to poor ventilation or high humidity. Symptoms: wheezing, nasal discharge, labored breathing. Treatment: improve airflow, reduce humidity, and consult a reptile veterinarian.

8.3 Parasites

Mites, ticks, and intestinal worms can affect blue tongue lizards. Symptoms: itching, weight loss, diarrhea. Regular cleaning and parasite checks help mitigate these risks.

8.4 Shedding Problems

Incomplete shedding can lead to skin infections. Provide high humidity, soaking opportunities, and gentle assistance if needed.

9. Breeding & Reproduction

9.1 Mating Season

Breeding typically occurs in late spring to early summer. The male will display bright colors and may become more aggressive. Monitor closely to prevent injury.

9.2 Egg Laying

Females will lay 10–20 eggs in a well lined nest box. Incubate eggs at 30–32 °C (86–90 °F) with 40–50% humidity. Incubation lasts 70–80 days.

9.3 Hatchling Care

Provide a warm, humid environment with a shallow water source. Feed a mix of protein and calcium supplements. Hatchlings grow rapidly, so monitor growth and adjust feeding accordingly.

10. Frequently Asked Questions

10.1 Can I keep a blue tongue lizard in a terrarium?

While a terrarium can work, it's not ideal for large blue tongue species due to limited space and ventilation. A larger, well ventilated enclosure is recommended.

10.2 How often should I replace the UVB bulb?

Replace every 6–12 months, depending on the manufacturer's guidelines, to maintain adequate UVB output.

10.3 Is it safe to keep a blue tongue lizard with other reptiles?

It's best to house them separately. Blue tongue lizards are aggressive and can harm smaller or more timid species.

10.4 What is the best diet for a juvenile blue tongue lizard?

A high protein diet (40–50%) with frequent feeding (3–4 times per week) is ideal. Provide a variety of insects and supplement with calcium powder.

10.5 How can I tell if my lizard is stressed?

Signs include loss of appetite, lethargy, rapid breathing, and excessive shedding. Reduce handling and ensure proper environmental conditions.

Conclusion

Keeping a blue tongue lizard can be a rewarding experience for those willing to meet their specific needs. By providing a well maintained enclosure, proper temperature, UVB lighting, a balanced diet, and regular health checks, you can ensure your reptile thrives. Remember, these lizards are long lived, so a commitment to their care is essential. With patience, attention to detail, and a love for these striking reptiles, you'll enjoy a healthy, vibrant

companion for years to come.

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