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AGAMAS

Painted Dragon

Ctenophorus pictus

Ctenophorus pictus is a small, diurnal agamid from Australia's arid interior, where the male glows in red, yellow and blue in spring. It grows to 18-25 cm, burrows into sand and feeds on insects. The species is a busy, fast enclosure lizard that requires a long, sandy enclosure, strong heat and UVB, but not much height. The species is very short-lived, and there is little care knowledge for this particular species.

Family: Agamidae Former name: *Amphibolurus pictus; Ctenophorus dudleyi* Published 16 November 2026

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**18-25 cm** total length incl. tail
Weight	**8-16 g**
Lifespan	**1-2 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial and burrowing**
Habitat	**Desert and semi-desert**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**100 × 40 × 40 cm** L × W × H for 3 adults
Temperature, day	**25-30 °C**
Basking spot	**35-40 °C**
Temperature, night	**20-25 °C**
Humidity	**20-40%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Essential** Ferguson zone 3
Diet	**Insects and plants**
Kept	**Singly, in pairs or one male with several females**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Clutch size	**2-4 eggs**
Clutches per year	**1-4**
Incubation	**55-80 days** at 28-32 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Appendix III**
EU annex	**Annex C**
IUCN	**Least Concern (LC)**

About the species

Ctenophorus pictus is a medium-sized agamid with a short, deep head, smooth scales and large, distinct ears. A low crest runs from the nape, which the animal can raise when startled. The body is low and compact, and the tail makes up about two thirds of the total length. The body is 7-10 cm from snout to vent, the whole animal measures 18-25 cm, and an adult weighs 8-16 g.

In the breeding season the male is brown to orange-red with light, dark-edged markings and a touch of bright blue and yellow. There are red, orange and yellow males. The red ones are the most aggressive and defend their territory fiercely, while the yellow ones survive better and sire more offspring. The colours become weaker with age.

C. pictus is one of the shortest-lived agamids. In the wild most live for only about a year, and only about one in ten animals reaches a second hibernation. In captivity too the species seems to live for only about a year, unlike relatives such as *Ctenophorus nuchalis*, which can live much longer in the enclosure. Anyone who wants to keep the species must therefore expect to breed if the stock is to continue. Females and young animals are drab, often rust-brown, and are hard to see against the sand. The scientific name comes from the Latin pictus, painted, and presumably alludes to the male's colours.

The animal is fast and nervous and is not suited to being picked up. On the other hand it is a pleasure to watch, because the males nod their heads, wave their forelimbs and lash their tails in a constant stream of signals. The species belongs to a genus of agamids that are all tied to Australia's arid regions. The former genus *Amphibolurus* has now been split, and older literature therefore often uses the old name *Amphibolurus pictus*.

Read more: Brumation and the seasons

Distribution and habitat

Ctenophorus pictus lives in the arid parts of southern and central Australia: south-eastern Western Australia, South Australia, north-western Victoria and west-central New South Wales. To the north it reaches into southern Northern Territory and south-western Queensland. By far the most records are from South Australia. The type locality is given as "Südaustralien" and points to the Adelaide area.

The species is common in its range and is assessed as not threatened.

> **Native range:** Australia.

HABITAT

The species lives in semi-arid and arid regions, especially in scrub and tussock grassland on sandy or saline soil. Here there are hot, dry summers and cool winters and little rain. The animal is diurnal and loves the sun. It sits and waits for prey on a stone, a low branch or a tussock and runs out after passing insects, especially ants and other arthropods. When disturbed, it flees to a nearby hole in the ground. The animal digs for itself.

In winter the species hibernates in the ground, and the breeding season falls in spring and early summer. The animals' preferred body temperature is about 36 °C.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

A pair or a small group of up to three adults needs an enclosure of at least 100 × 40 × 40 cm (length × width × height). The measurement is borrowed from *Ctenophorus nuchalis*, which has the same way of life. The species is terrestrial and runs a lot, so floor area is what matters, not height. Larger is always better. Fit a secure lid, because the animal can jump surprisingly high.

The substrate is sand, so the animal can dig. Use clean play sand or filter sand without chemicals, and make the layer as deep as possible, preferably 10 cm or more in part of the enclosure. Furnish with flat stones, cork bark and hides, preferably one per animal, and with one or two tall stones or branches where the male can sit and look out. Place heavy stones right on the floor and pack sand around them, so the animal does not dig under them and get crushed. Keep males apart, because they are territorial. A pair or one male with two or three females does fine.

Make the ventilation with mesh in the top. Clean daily for droppings, and replace parts of the sand as needed.

TEMPERATURE

The species is a desert lizard and needs a large temperature difference. The air at the cool end must be about 25 °C during the day, and under the basking spot the surface must be 35-40 °C, so the animal can reach its preferred body temperature of about 36 °C. The basking spot should not exceed 43 °C. Measure with a thermometer at both the warm and the cool end, and use an IR thermometer for the basking spot itself.

At night the temperature may fall to 20-25 °C; the figures are borrowed from *C. nuchalis*. In winter both temperature and day length must be lowered, because the species hibernates in the wild. The animal must always be able to get away from the heat. If the whole enclosure is too hot, it can suffer heatstroke.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

The humidity must be low, about 20-40 %; the figure is an estimate based on the habitat. The enclosure must be well ventilated and kept dry, and the sand must not become damp, with the exception of the laying corner. Mist lightly once a day, so the animals can drink the droplets, and also provide drinking water in a shallow, heavy dish, which is changed every day.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

Diurnal desert species need strong light and UVB. The Ferguson zone has not been established for the species; *C. nuchalis* belongs to zone 3-4, and zone 3 is a good starting point. Use a high-output UVB tube or a combined heat lamp with UVB over the basking spot, so the animal can get close. In summer the light must be on for about 13 hours and in winter for 8-10 hours. UVB tubes are replaced every 6-12 months, combination lamps after 12-18 months.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

The species eats mostly insects, often ants and other small arthropods in the wild, and some animals also take plant matter. In the enclosure crickets and roaches are the staple food, with mealworms and silkworms for variety. The feeder insects must not be larger than the width of the animal's head. Dust the feeder insects with calcium at every feeding and with a multivitamin once a week, no more often.

Adults are fed two to three times a week with as much as they can eat in about 20 minutes. Young animals are fed almost daily. Remove uneaten food, because roaches and crickets can bite the animal at night. The species also eats a fair amount of plant matter in captivity, so offer dandelion leaves, flowers or other leaves, and see what the animal will take. Choose only plants that have not been sprayed with poison.

Read more: Feeder animals: keeping and breeding Read more: Calcium, vitamins and supplements

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

The animal is fast, nervous and withdraws quickly if startled. Handling is not necessary and stresses the animal.

The male marks his territory with head-bobbing and arm-waving. Two males in the same enclosure fight and can seriously injure each other. Therefore keep only one male, and give him one or more females. The females are peaceful and can be kept together if there is space and plenty of hides.

Young animals should be kept apart from adults, because the older animals can take them for food.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The male is larger and strongly coloured, has a broader head and larger femoral pores on the underside of the hind legs. The female is smaller and subdued in colour, often rust-brown. Young animals can be hard to sex, and the colours develop only with maturity. Since most animals live for only about a year, they breed as early as the first spring after hatching and the first winter; the exact age at sexual maturity is not documented.

MATING

The breeding season falls in spring and early summer, after hibernation. The male displays with head-bobbing and colour change, chases the female around and bites her on the nape during mating. The animals must be healthy and have had strong light and heat, and a winter period with shorter days and lower temperature before the breeding season suits the species' annual rhythm. The male must be with the female all the time: without the male's continued presence the female does not lay fertilised eggs. Therefore keep the pair together throughout the season in an enclosure with many hides, so the female can retreat.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays 2-4 eggs per clutch and 1-4 clutches per season. In the spring and summer months there must be a corner or a covered box with sand that is kept damp, where she can dig. The water dish must not stand where she can dig, because a female can lay eggs in it, and then the eggs are lost. A pregnant female digs around the whole enclosure and often eats less,

and after laying she suddenly looks thinner. Check daily for new eggs.

INCUBATION

The eggs are brushed free of sand and laid without being turned, half-buried in damp vermiculite in closed cups. If they are incubated at 28-32 °C, 30 °C is a good starting point. Temperature affects the sex: at 28 °C most young become females, at 32 °C the distribution becomes more even, and the parents also matter. The duration is not documented for the species; in *C. nuchalis* the eggs hatch after 8-11 weeks at the same temperatures.

REARING THE YOUNG

The young need a simple enclosure with damp kitchen paper as substrate for the first weeks, a basking spot and several hides at different temperatures. Mist several times a day in the first week, then once a day. The young must have food right away: small crickets and very small roaches as well as finely chopped dandelion leaves. Separate the young from the adults, which can eat them, and sort them by size, so the weakest are not chased away from the food. The rearing advice is borrowed from *C. nuchalis*.

Health and common mistakes

Most diseases are caused by mistakes in care. Typical problems are:

- Bone loss (metabolic bone disease) from too little UVB and calcium. Insects are poor in calcium, so supplements are necessary.
- Gastrointestinal problems and digestive stasis at too low a temperature and feeder insects that are too large.
- Injuries to the snout when the animal rubs against glass or mesh in an attempt to escape.
- Intestinal parasites in newly bought animals. Have a faecal sample examined.
- Obesity and fatty liver from feeding too often.
- Egg-laying difficulties in females without a suitable box.
- Bites from feeder insects left in the enclosure at night.

Go to a vet with reptile experience if the animal stops eating, is lethargic or has a swollen belly.

Read more: Common diseases and signs of illness

Always ask someone who knows

This guide is a good place to start, but it cannot replace experience. Animals differ, and much of what matters most is learned from people who have kept the species for years. Talk to a breeder, an experienced keeper or a vet who knows reptiles and amphibians before you get the animal - and again if anything looks wrong.