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AGAMAS

Brown Pricklenape

Acanthosaura lepidogaster

Acanthosaura lepidogaster is a grey-green to brown forest agamid with a spine behind each eye and a low crest of spines on the nape. It is found from southern China through Vietnam and Laos to Thailand and Myanmar. The species grows to 20-28 cm, lives in the undergrowth and on the forest floor and needs a humid, relatively cool enclosure where the air does not get warmer than 28 °C.

Family: Agamidae Former name: *Acanthosaura lamnidentata; Acanthosaura fruhstorferi; Acanthosaura braueri*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**20-28 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**5-10 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal and terrestrial**
Habitat	**Rainforest and montane forest**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**100 × 50 × 100 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**20-26 °C**
Basking spot	**28-30 °C**
Temperature, night	**18-21 °C**
Humidity	**70-90%**
Water	**Water section**
UVB	**Recommended** Ferguson zone 2
Diet	**Insects and worms/snails**
Kept	**Singly or in pairs**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Clutch size	**6-12 eggs**
Incubation	**110-130 days** at 25-27 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Not listed**
EU annex	**Not listed**
IUCN	**Least Concern (LC)**

About the species

Acanthosaura lepidogaster is a slender forest agamid with a laterally compressed body and a long tail. The base colour is grey-green, olive green or brownish, often with dark spots and crossbands, and the shade changes with temperature, light and mood. The throat is pale grey to black, and the belly is white. Behind each eye sits a strong spine, and on the nape and along the back runs a low crest of pointed scales. The spines are shorter than in *A. capra*, and the animal is smaller and browner.

Adults grow to 20-28 cm including the tail, and the tail makes up about three fifths of the length. The species was described in 1829 by Georges Cuvier. The name comes from the Greek *lepis*, scale, and *gaster*, belly, although the belly scales are nothing special in this species. The names *A. lamnidentata* and *A. fruhstorferi* are older designations for the same species. The population on Hainan was for a time included but is now again a separate species, *A. hainanensis*, and several new species have recently been split off from the genus in the region.

The species in the genus are often confused in the trade, so check which species you have before adjusting the care to a guide. The animals are calm and can become fairly tame, but they are not animals for daily handling. Wild-caught animals are often stressed and infested with parasites; captive-bred animals are far preferable.

The care of this particular species is only sparsely described. The figures for climate and enclosure are based on the closely related *A. capra*, and the figures for eggs and incubation on *A. crucigera*.

Read more: Incubating eggs Read more: Buying animals: captive-bred, wild-caught and transport

Distribution and habitat

Acanthosaura lepidogaster has a wide distribution in Southeast Asia and southern China. It is found in northern Thailand, in Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar and in southern China (Yunnan, Guangxi, Guangdong and Fujian). In Vietnam it is known from many provinces, from Lao Cai and Ha Giang in the north to Kon Tum in the south.

The distribution is under revision: the population on Hainan has been split off as a separate species, and older records may cover several closely related species. The species is listed as Least Concern (LC).

> **Native range:** China, Laos, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand and Vietnam.

HABITAT

Acanthosaura lepidogaster lives in humid forests and forest edges in hilly and mountainous terrain, from the lowlands up to the mid elevations. It is diurnal and stays on trunks and branches low above the ground, in the undergrowth and on the forest floor, where it sits completely still and is well camouflaged against bark and foliage. The females lay their eggs under rotting wood and bark.

The forests are shaded and humid. In the northern part of the range, in southern China and northern Vietnam, the climate is subtropical with cool winters, while further south the species lives in warmer, lower forests. The animal basks only a little.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult needs an enclosure of at least 100 × 50 × 100 cm (length × width × height). The species uses both the branches and the floor, so floor area is just as important as height. A pair needs more space. A mesh lid and large ventilation areas ensure air exchange when humidity is high.

Furnish with vertical and diagonal branches and trunks, cork or bark panels on the back wall and dense, living plants that give shelter and hold droplets. Place pieces of bark and roots on the floor as hiding places. A shallow water feature or a large, shallow water bowl, ideally with a drip, is used for drinking and bathing; the water should be no more than 10-15 cm deep.

The substrate is a moisture-retaining mix of forest soil, coconut fibre and a little sand over a drainage layer, so that no water stands at the bottom. It should be 15-20 cm deep so the female can dig. Remove droppings daily.

Do not keep two males together. A pair can live together in a large enclosure if there are plenty of hiding places in the foliage and on the floor.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation Read more: Terrarium construction and bioactive substrate

TEMPERATURE

Acanthosaura lepidogaster tolerates heat poorly. The air in the enclosure should be 20-26 °C during the day and must not get warmer than 28 °C. If it stays warmer for a longer period, there is a risk of heatstroke, stress and dehydration. The limit is a couple of degrees below that for *A. capra*, because the species also lives in subtropical forests with a cooler climate.

A small basking spot of 28-30 °C is enough, because the species hardly basks at all. The most important thing is an even, moderate temperature throughout the enclosure. At night the temperature should fall to 18-21 °C. Measure with digital thermometers both at the basking spot and down in the enclosure.

In hot periods the enclosure can become too warm in a warm room. Move it to a cooler room, use a fan, or switch the heating off. The enclosure must never stand in direct sun.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be 70-80 % during the day and ideally around 90 % at night. Mist the enclosure thoroughly with soft water 2-3 times a day, so that droplets hang on plants and walls. A timer-controlled rain system keeps the level stable. Measure with a digital hygrometer in the middle of the enclosure.

The animal drinks from droplets and from running water, and without daily misting it can become dehydrated and get problems with shedding. The enclosure should dry out a little between mistings, otherwise mould develops, so good ventilation is just as important as humidity.

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species is diurnal but lives in the shade of the forest and needs only weak UVB. Use a T5 HO tube of 6 % (Ferguson zone 2) in a reflective fitting over the mesh, covering about half the length of the enclosure. Check the distance between tube and animal with a UV meter, and make sure the animal can always withdraw into shade.

Supplement with an LED or T5 daylight lamp so the plants thrive, and keep the lights on 11-13 hours a day, longest in summer. Replace the tubes according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

The species feeds on insects and other small animals. Give a varied diet of crickets, cockroaches, grasshoppers, silkworms, earthworms and small slugs. Mealworms, waxworms and other fatty larvae are given only occasionally, because the animals easily become overweight. Prey should be no larger than the distance between the animal's eyes. The animal eats mostly during the day and likes to hunt on the floor.

Juveniles are fed daily with as many small insects as they can eat in 10 minutes. Adults are fed daily or every other day, as much as they eat in about 5 minutes. Lightly dust the insects with a calcium supplement with a little D3 and vitamins, and feed them greens and vegetables for at least a day before feeding.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Acanthosaura lepidogaster is a calm forest agamid that often sits completely still on a branch, a trunk or the floor. It rarely moves fast. When frightened, it darkens, flares the nape crest or opens its mouth wide. These are signs of stress, and the animal should then be left in peace.

Give a new animal 1-2 weeks of peace. Tame it by being present, offering food from the hand and letting it climb onto the hand rather than grabbing it. Keep handling short and infrequent. Wash your hands with soap after any contact with animals, enclosure and food, because reptiles can carry salmonella.

Keep males apart, because they are territorial and can fight. A pair can manage together in a large enclosure, but there is no guarantee. The species also does very well alone.

Read more: Quarantine and hygiene

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The differences between the sexes are small. The male is slimmer and usually has a thicker tail base, a slightly larger head and a stronger nape crest, while the female is broader in the body. The sex is most reliably determined by a vet.

The age at sexual maturity is not known. Do not put a female into breeding until she is fully grown and in good condition.

MATING

The mating season is not known. A cool period of 6-8 weeks in winter with shorter days and a couple of degrees lower temperature gets breeding going, and when light and warmth increase again, the animals are quickly ready to mate. The male nods his head, follows the female and grips her with a bite on the nape during mating.

Place the male with the female in her enclosure under supervision, and remove him if the female gets wounds or becomes stressed.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays the eggs about a month after mating. A few days before, she stops eating and makes trial digs on the floor. She digs a hole of up to 10 cm in moist soil or under rotting wood and bark, lays 6-12 eggs and scrapes the hole shut.

The substrate should be 15-20 cm deep and moist enough that a dug hole holds; a mix of soil and peat is suitable. Without a suitable site the female can retain the eggs, which can cause life-threatening egg binding. Females also lay infertile eggs without a male.

Read more: Common diseases and signs of illness

INCUBATION

Carefully dig up the eggs and place them in the same orientation in a closed container with moist vermiculite or perlite. At 25-27 °C they hatch after 110-130 days. A lower temperature lengthens the incubation period.

Do not turn the eggs, and keep the humidity in the container high. Check regularly for mould, and remove infertile eggs that collapse or become slimy.

REARING THE YOUNG

The juveniles are moved to a rearing enclosure with the same climate as the adults': high humidity, moderate warmth, UVB and plenty of twigs and leaves. Any water feature should be no more than 5 cm deep. The juveniles can grow up together in a spacious enclosure, but separate them if they begin to fight.

Mist daily, and feed daily with small crickets, small worms and small snails, lightly dusted with calcium and vitamins. How fast the juveniles grow is not known for the species.

Health and common mistakes

Wild-caught animals are often stressed and heavily infested with parasites, so a faecal sample at a vet with reptile experience is the first thing a new animal should have. The typical problems are:

- Heatstroke and dehydration at too high a temperature. The air must not get warmer than 28 °C.
- Problems with shedding and dry eyes at too low humidity and too little misting.
- Metabolic bone disease from too little calcium and UVB.
- Respiratory infections and mould if the enclosure is wet and poorly ventilated.
- Obesity from too many fatty larvae.
- Internal parasites and mites, especially in wild-caught animals.
- Egg binding in females without a suitable place to dig. It is life-threatening and requires a vet.

A healthy animal has clear eyes, a plump tail base and a sturdy body. It breathes with its mouth closed and eats regularly. See a vet if the animal loses weight, stops eating, sits listlessly on the bottom or breathes with its mouth open.

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.