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AGAMAS

Mallee Dragon

Ctenophorus fordi

Ctenophorus fordi is a small, diurnal agamid from the arid, sandy scrub of Australia, where it feeds mainly on ants. It grows to 13-18 cm, and the tail makes up a good two-thirds of that. The upper side is sandy to reddish orange-brown with a pale stripe along each side. Very little is known about the husbandry of this species, so the requirements are based on the climate and on the related *Ctenophorus nuchalis*.

Family: Agamidae Former name: *Amphibolurus fordi; Phthanodon fordi*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**13-18 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**1-2 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial and burrowing**
Habitat	**Desert and semi-desert**
Difficulty	**Experienced**

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	**2-5 eggs**
Incubation	**56-77 days** at 28-32 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Ctenophorus fordi is a small agamid measuring 4-5 cm from snout to vent. The tail is a good twice as long as the body, so the animal reaches 13-18 cm in total. The upper side is sandy to reddish orange-brown with a pale stripe along each side from the nape to the base of the tail. The stripe is edged with a thin black line or black spots, and the area between the stripes is flecked with small, pale spots. Males have dark spots on the throat, often in a chevron pattern, and a row of femoral pores; otherwise the sexes look very similar.

The species signals almost only with head bobs, which both males and females use when they meet another animal. The scientific name commemorates the zoologist Julian Ralph Ford, who collected the holotype.

The species has been split several times. In 2019 the populations of the inland south-east of Australia were described as *Ctenophorus spinodomus*, and in 2023 the populations of south-eastern South Australia and north-western Victoria were separated as *Ctenophorus tuniluki*. Older literature under the names *C. fordi* or *Amphibolurus fordi* may therefore refer to these

species. The lifespan of *C. fordi* is not documented; *C. spinodomus* and *C. tuniluki* usually live only a single season in the wild, so the 1-2 years in the fact box is an estimate.

Distribution and habitat

Ctenophorus fordi lives from the Coolgardie area in south-eastern Western Australia and along the southern edge of the Great Victoria Desert through central South Australia to the far north-west of New South Wales and the far south-west of Queensland. The species is common and is assessed as not threatened. It occurs in several protected areas.

> **Native range:** Australia.

HABITAT

The species lives in dry to semi-arid, sandy terrain with shrubs and spinifex (*Triodia*) tussocks, especially in mallee scrub and on vegetated sand dunes. It can also be seen on open sand flats at the edge of the scrub. The animals have burrows at the base of the spinifex tussocks, where they shelter from heat and predators.

The species is diurnal. It forages on open, sandy flats and runs into the nearest tussock or bush if disturbed. In winter the animals are dormant. The diet is 30-50% ants, and the rest is other small arthropods such as spiders and beetles. The animal sits and waits for prey.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Very little is known about the husbandry of *Ctenophorus fordi*. The climate in its range is dry, with hot summers and cool winters. The figures in this and the following sections are borrowed from *Ctenophorus nuchalis*, which has the same way of life but is about twice as large from snout to vent.

A pair or a small group of up to three animals needs an enclosure of at least 100 × 40 × 40 cm (length × width × height). The species is terrestrial and runs and digs a great deal, so floor area is what matters, not height. Fit a secure lid.

The substrate is clean play sand or filter sand without chemicals, as deep as possible, so that the animal can dig in. Furnish with flat stones, cork bark and hides, preferably one per animal, and with spinifex-like tussocks of grass or artificial plants, which the species knows from the wild. Heavy stones are set right down on the floor and packed with sand, so that the animal is not crushed. Provide ventilation with mesh in the top. Clean out droppings daily.

TEMPERATURE

The air in the enclosure is 25-30 °C by day, and the cool end is about 25 °C. Under the basking spot the surface should be 35-40 °C and no higher than 43 °C. Measure with a thermometer in both the warm and the cool end and with an IR thermometer on the basking spot. The animal must always be able to get away from the heat.

At night the temperature can fall to 20-25 °C; the figure is an estimate. In winter both temperature and day length are reduced.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be low, about 20-40%; the figure is an estimate based on the habitat. The enclosure is dry and well ventilated. Provide fresh drinking water in a shallow, heavy dish, changed every day, and do not mist the sand.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species is diurnal and needs strong light and UVB. Ferguson zone 3 is a good starting point; the zone is borrowed from other diurnal desert agamids. Use a high-output UVB tube or a mercury vapour lamp over the basking spot, so that the animal can get close. The light is on for about 13 hours in summer and 8-10 hours in winter. UVB tubes are replaced every 6-12 months, mercury vapour lamps every 12-18 months.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

The species eats almost exclusively small arthropods, especially ants. In the enclosure, small crickets, small cockroaches and other small insects are the staple. Feeder insects must not be larger than the width of the animal's head, and for such a small species they must be very small. Dust the feeders with calcium at every feed and with a multivitamin once a week.

Adults are fed two to three times a week with as much as they can eat in about 20 minutes; young animals more often. Remove uneaten food, because crickets and cockroaches can bite the animal at night. Whether the species takes plant matter is not documented.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

The species is quick and shy and immediately takes cover in a tussock or down in the sand if frightened. Handling is not necessary and stresses the animal.

Males and females both signal with head bobs when they meet another animal. Whether males are aggressive towards each other is not documented, so keep only one male with one or more females, or only females. Young animals are kept apart from adults, which may take them for food.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Males are recognised by the dark spots on the throat and the row of femoral pores on the underside of the hind legs. In young animals sex is difficult to see. The age at sexual maturity is not documented for the species.

MATING

Mating takes place in spring. Breeding behaviour in captivity is not documented. A cool winter period with shorter days, followed by warmth and long days, matches the seasons in the range.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays several clutches of 2-5 eggs in succession over the season. In the wild the eggs hatch from December to March. In captivity there should be a corner with moist sand where she can dig. The water dish must not stand where she can dig, because she may lay eggs in it.

INCUBATION

Brush the eggs free of sand and place them in moist vermiculite in the same orientation in which they lay. Incubation temperature and time are not documented for the species; incubate them as for *C. nuchalis* at 28-32 °C, where they hatch after about 8-11 weeks.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

The hatchlings are very small. They need a simple enclosure with damp kitchen paper as flooring, a basking spot and several hides. Offer small springtails, small crickets and very small cockroaches. Keep the hatchlings apart from the adults.

Health and common mistakes

Health problems are not documented for the species. The most likely ones are caused by errors in husbandry, as in other diurnal desert agamids:

- Metabolic bone disease from too little UVB and calcium.
- Digestive stasis and constipation from feeders that are too large or temperatures that are too low.
- Snout injuries when the animal rubs against glass or mesh.
- Obesity from feeding too often.
- Bites from feeder insects left in the enclosure overnight.

See a veterinarian 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.