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CHAMELEONS

African Chameleon

Chamaeleo africanus

Chamaeleo africanus is an arboreal chameleon from the dry savanna of the Sahel and along the Nile, from Mauritania to Sudan and Upper Egypt. It is often green with many black spots, has no lobes at the back of the head and reaches 23-46 cm in length. The species is rarely kept, and its care draws on its climate and on better-known species of the genus. It must live alone in a tall mesh enclosure with UVB.

Family: Chamaeleonidae Former name: *Chamaeleo aegyptius; Chamaeleo calcaratus; Chamaeleo candidus; Chamaeleo mexicanus; Chamaeleo basiliscus*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**23-46 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**4-8 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal**
Habitat	**Savanna and wetland**
Difficulty	**Experienced**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**60 × 60 × 120 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**25-30 °C**
Basking spot	**32-35 °C**
Temperature, night	**18-22 °C**
Humidity	**40-60%**
Water	**No water dish**
UVB	**Essential** Ferguson zone 3
Diet	**Insects**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Clutch size	**20-70 eggs**
Incubation	**90 days** at 28 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Appendix II**
EU annex	**Annex B**
IUCN	**Least Concern (LC)**

About the species

Chamaeleo africanus is a slow, laterally compressed chameleon with independently moving eyes, a prehensile tail and a large, bony casque on the head. It is often green with many black spots, but changes colour like other chameleons. The legs are long, and the male has a spur on the hind leg (tarsal spur) that the female lacks. The species resembles *Chamaeleo chamaeleon*, but lacks the lobes at the back of the head and grows larger.

Animals from the Sahel and the Nile valley measure 23-26 cm in total. The population in the Peloponnese in Greece is much larger: males of about 43 cm and females of up to 46 cm.

Together with *Chamaeleo calcaricarens*, the species forms a group of closely related forms. *C. calcaricarens* lives east of the Ethiopian Rift to Somalia, and the male lacks the spur. *Chamaeleo aegyptius*, *Chamaeleo calcaratus*, *Chamaeleo candidus* and *Chamaeleo mexicanus* are synonyms.

The lifespan is not documented; the 4-8 years in the box is borrowed from *Chamaeleo calyptratus*.

Distribution and habitat

Chamaeleo africanus lives in the Sahel and the Sudanian belt from Mauritania and Mali in the west through Niger, Nigeria, Benin and Cameroon to the Central African Republic, South Sudan and Sudan in the east. Along the Nile the range extends north to Upper Egypt. The population near Alexandria was introduced several hundred years ago.

In the Peloponnese in Greece lives a population that was probably brought there from Egypt as early as antiquity. It is not shown on the map, which shows only the native range.

> **Native range:** Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Sudan, South Sudan and Egypt.

HABITAT

Chamaeleo africanus lives in dry savanna and is arboreal. It is found on low branches, in bushes and in reeds (*Phragmites*), and in the Peloponnese also in tamarisk. It is diurnal and moves slowly and cautiously, or sits perfectly still on a branch. The diet is mainly insects, which it catches with its sticky tongue; it can also take small lizards and nestling birds.

The female goes down to the ground to breed and lays up to 70 eggs in an underground nest. In the Peloponnese, the females head for the sandy beaches to lay their eggs. The eggs hatch after about three months, and the young become sexually mature after a year or more. The climate in the range is dry and hot with a short rainy season.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Little is known about the care of *Chamaeleo africanus*, and the species is rarely kept. Care is based on the climate in its range and on the closely related *Chamaeleo dilepis* and *Chamaeleo calyptratus*, whose figures are borrowed. *Chamaeleo senegalensis* lives in the same part of Africa and has similar requirements.

An adult needs a mesh enclosure of at least 60 × 60 × 120 cm (length × width × height). This corresponds to the size for other large *Chamaeleo* species; animals from the Sahel are smaller than the largest animals, but bigger is always better. The enclosure must be tall enough for the animal to climb above eye level. Only one chameleon should live in each enclosure.

Mesh at the top provides ventilation and makes it possible to hang lighting and heating outside. Furnish with suitable branches and sturdy plants that provide plenty of cover. The branches must be far enough from the mesh that the animal cannot get up under a heat source and burn itself. The substrate can be a mixture of peat and sand if there are live plants. The species comes from a dry climate, so the enclosure must not become wet: avoid puddles, and ensure good ventilation.

TEMPERATURE

Chamaeleo africanus needs 25-30 °C by day and a basking spot at 32-35 °C. At night the temperature should fall to 18-22 °C. The figures are borrowed from *Chamaeleo dilepis* and suit a warm savanna climate. Measure the temperature with a thermometer, and make sure the animal can choose between warm and cool.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity for *Chamaeleo africanus* should be around 40-60%. The figure is an estimate for dry savanna and is slightly below that for *Chamaeleo dilepis*. The animal does not drink from standing water, but from water droplets on the leaves, so the enclosure should be misted once or twice a day until the animal stops drinking. No water must be left standing, because it causes fungal growth. A drip system that runs down over the leaves is a good supplement. Dehydration is one of the most common causes of death in chameleons.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

Chamaeleo africanus is diurnal and needs full-spectrum light and UVB for 12-14 hours a day. The UVB source should be no more than about 30 cm from the animal. Ferguson zone 3 is an estimate based on its way of life in open savanna. All lamps hang outside the mesh.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Chamaeleo africanus is an insectivore and needs live insects such as crickets, cockroaches and silkworms. The insects should be well fed on a calcium-rich diet and dusted with a mineral and vitamin supplement before being given. Adults get a couple of insects every day; the amount is borrowed from *Chamaeleo dilepis*. Uneaten insects are removed, because chameleons become agitated by insects crawling on them. Vary the diet.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Chamaeleo africanus should preferably not be handled. The animal must live alone, and the enclosure should have many hiding places in the foliage. Give a new animal peace, and place the enclosure so that people are not constantly walking past. Animals in the trade are wild-caught, and the species is not suitable for beginners.

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

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The male of *Chamaeleo africanus* is recognised by the tarsal spur on the hind leg. The species becomes sexually mature after a year or more. In *Chamaeleo dilepis*, a female about to lay eggs can be recognised by a lumpy hindbody, and she needs a place with soil to dig in.

MATING

Breeding of *Chamaeleo africanus* in captivity is not documented, so the advice is borrowed from *Chamaeleo dilepis*: heavier misting for a period corresponding to the rainy season, and a break in which the male is kept apart before being put with the female again, make the animals receptive to mating. Only put the animals together under supervision, and separate them again after mating.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female of *Chamaeleo africanus* goes down from the branches, digs a hole in the ground and lays the eggs in an underground nest. A clutch is up to 70 eggs; the lowest number is not documented, and the 20 in the box is borrowed from *Chamaeleo dilepis*. The number of clutches per year is not documented. Give the female a deep egg-laying container with moist sand or a mixture of sand and soil.

INCUBATION

In the wild, the eggs of *Chamaeleo africanus* hatch after about three months. Incubation in captivity is not documented. The incubation temperature of 28 °C and moist vermiculite are borrowed from *Chamaeleo dilepis*, whose eggs, however, take much longer to hatch (about 300 days). Monitor the eggs, and expect the incubation period to be longer than in the wild.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

Rearing of *Chamaeleo africanus* has not been described. The young need the same basic care as other *Chamaeleo* species: a tall mesh enclosure with UVB, water droplets to drink and live insects of suitable size, dusted with calcium.

Health and common mistakes

There is no health data for *Chamaeleo africanus*, but the typical problems in chameleons are:

- Dehydration, one of the biggest risks. Mist daily, and check that the animal is drinking.
- Fungal growth and respiratory infection, if the enclosure is wet and poorly ventilated.
- Metabolic bone disease from too little UVB or calcium.
- Burns, if the animal can get up under a heat source.
- Stress and parasites in wild-caught animals. Have a faecal sample examined.
- Egg binding in females that do not have a suitable place to lay eggs.

See a vet with reptile experience if the animal is not eating, is losing weight or seems lethargic.

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.