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CHAMELEONS

Short-Tailed Pygmy Chameleon

Rieppeleon brevicaudatus

Rieppeleon brevicaudatus is a small, brown, ground-living chameleon from the forest floor in Tanzania and Kenya. It reaches only 8-10 cm, lays eggs and resembles a dead leaf. The species is hardy for its size and is kept in a small, humid enclosure with a thick layer of leaf litter and at most 25 °C by day.

Family: Chamaeleonidae Former name: *Rhampholeon brevicaudatus*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**8-10 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**3-5 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal and terrestrial**
Habitat	**Rainforest and montane forest**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**40 × 30 × 40 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**20-25 °C**
Temperature, night	**16-20 °C**
Humidity	**70-95%**
UVB	**Recommended** Ferguson zone 1
Diet	**Insects and small invertebrates (springtails, fruit flies)**
Kept	**Singly or in pairs**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Sexually mature	**4-8 months**
Clutch size	**1-6 eggs**
Clutches per year	**2-4**
Incubation	**60-75 days** at 20-25 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Rieppeleon brevicaudatus is one of the smallest chameleons. It is brownish to greyish brown and can change to yellow, orange, green or almost black. The colour follows both the surroundings and the mood: the animal turns dark when stressed, and males show bright, high-contrast stripes when in a mating mood. Resting animals compress the body from the sides and resemble a dead leaf with a dark midrib. Under the chin sit a few raised scales, a small "beard". The male is more elongated than the female and has a longer and stouter tail; the female is rounder. The species name refers to the short tail (Latin *brevis*, short, and *cauda*, tail).

The species reaches 8-10 cm in total, and the female's snout-vent length is about 6 cm. It belongs to a group of small, short-tailed chameleons that formerly stood in the genus *Rhampholeon*. When threatened or picked up, it can vibrate. The animal should be observed and not handled; it is hardy for its size but tolerates heat poorly.

Distribution and habitat

Rieppeleon brevicaudatus lives in East Africa: north-eastern and eastern Tanzania, including the Usambara and Uluguru Mountains, and south-eastern Kenya. The type locality is Derema in the Usambara Mountains. The species is found from sea level up to about 1,300 m.

> **Native range:** Tanzania and Kenya.

HABITAT

The species lives on the forest floor in humid forest in the lowlands and in the mountains: in the leaf litter, in grass and in the low vegetation close to the ground. The animals sleep on low branches and stems, and resting animals resemble a withered leaf. Only a small part of the range is covered by forest today, and the species lives in scattered patches of forest that continue to shrink.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult animal needs an enclosure of at least 40 × 30 × 40 cm (length × width × height). A pair or a male with two females needs at least 75 × 30 × 40 cm. Floor area is more important than height, because the species uses mostly the forest floor and low branches. A glass enclosure retains humidity well; give it ventilation in the lid.

The substrate must be 5-8 cm deep and consist of damp forest soil, sandy soil or peat-based soil with a thick layer of leaves on top. It must be damp, but not wet. Avoid fresh coconut fibre, which the animals can swallow and become constipated from. Add cork, branches at several heights and moss, and plant with small, shade-tolerant plants, so the animal can hide. A lid is necessary, because the species climbs well, even on glass.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

TEMPERATURE

The species comes from the forest floor and tolerates heat poorly. The daytime temperature must be 20-25 °C and the night temperature 16-20 °C. For short periods it tolerates more, but over 30 °C is dangerous. It does not need a basking spot or a heat lamp, and room temperature is often enough. A weak spotlight is optional, but the surface under it must reach at most 28 °C. In hot summer periods the enclosure must stand in a cool room.

The species does not need a large temperature gradient; even temperatures with a slight drop at night suit it best.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

The humidity must be 70-95 %; the species tolerates down to about 60 % for short periods. Mist thoroughly with a fine spray twice a day, so the animal can drink droplets from the leaves, and let the surface of the substrate dry a little between mistings. A drip system makes the substrate too wet. The warmer it is, the more important high humidity is.

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species lives on the forest floor and does not need strong light. A fluorescent tube or an LED with white light along the whole length of the enclosure, on for about 12 hours a day, suits the day length in East Africa. The species can be kept without UVB, but a weak UVB tube over part of the lid (Ferguson zone 1, UV index about 1 at the uppermost branches) is recommended. The light must not heat the enclosure or dry out the substrate, and direct sun through glass must be avoided.

UVB tubes are replaced according to the manufacturer's instructions. Plants and hides ensure that the animal can always choose shade.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Rieppeleon brevicaudatus eats small insects and other arthropods: fruit flies, small crickets, cockroach nymphs and woodlice. Prey must not be larger than the distance between the animal's eyes. Adults get 4-6 small crickets or the equivalent every other day, and juveniles get small insects several times a day. Dust with calcium without D3 twice a week and with multivitamin and calcium with D3 once a month each, because small chameleons do not tolerate too much D3.

Provide feeder insects that have themselves been well fed. Do not use insects from the wild. The insects can run free in the enclosure or be given in a shallow dish; large crickets running free can bite resting animals at night.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

The species is kept singly, in pairs or as a male with two females in an enclosure that is large enough. Males must not be kept together, and females can stress each other in small enclosures, especially if they are of different size. A subordinate animal hides, stops eating and must be moved immediately. Juveniles must be separated from each other when they are 2-4 months old, to avoid aggression and unwanted breeding.

The animal is calm and lets itself be observed, but tolerates handling poorly. Dark colour is a sign of stress, cold or illness, especially if it persists.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The male is more elongated and has a longer, stouter tail than the female, which is rounder. The animals mature early: the first matings take place from around 3-4 months of age, and the animals are fully mature at 4-8 months.

MATING

The species breeds all year, perhaps slightly less in winter. A receptive male shows his brightest stripes and stays close to the female. A female that does not want to mate sways vigorously from side to side and rejects the male. A pair can stay together if the enclosure is large enough. The female can store sperm and lay several clutches after one mating, so she must have plenty of food and calcium.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays 2-4 clutches a year, about a month after mating. A clutch is 1-6 eggs. She buries the eggs in the substrate or lays them on the ground, so the enclosure needs at least 5 cm of damp soil.

INCUBATION

The eggs hatch after 60-75 days at room temperature, 20-25 °C, without a resting period. They can stay in the enclosure or be moved to damp vermiculite or perlite in a box with about 75 % humidity. Eggs lying loose on the ground in the enclosure can be eaten by the feeder insects.

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are very small but have large heads and from the start eat small crickets and fruit flies, preferably a mixture, several times a day. Keep them separate from the adults and at no more than 24 °C. Dust the food with calcium a couple of times a week. The young grow quickly and must be separated after 2-4 months.

Health and common mistakes

The species is hardy for its size, but wild-caught animals are often weakened and dehydrated after transport. The typical problems are:

- Heat stress above 28 °C; above 30 °C is dangerous. Move the enclosure to a cool room.
- Desiccation from humidity that is too low. Mist twice a day.
- Respiratory infections from stagnant air or a substrate that is too wet. Signs are yawning and mucus.
- Constipation from fresh coconut fibre as substrate.
- Parasites, especially in wild-caught animals. Have a faecal sample examined.
- Overdosing of vitamins, especially D3.
- Egg-laying difficulties in females without a damp, deep substrate.

Lifespan in captivity is about 3-5 years. Contact a vet with reptile experience for loss of appetite, persistent dark colour or limpness.

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

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.