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FROGS

Orange-legged Leaf Frog

Pithecopus hypochondrialis

Pithecopus hypochondrialis is a small, slender leaf frog from northern South America with bright orange flanks and thighs, barred in black, and large eyes with a vertical slit pupil. It is nocturnal, walks slowly through the branches instead of hopping and breeds in the enclosure if a rainy season is imitated.

Family: Phyllomedusidae Former name: *Phyllomedusa hypochondrialis* **Mild skin toxins**

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**3-5 cm** snout-vent length
Lifespan	**5-8 years**
Active	**At dusk and at night**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal**
Habitat	**Savanna, dry forest and wetland**
Skin toxins	**Mild** Wash your hands after contact and keep your fingers away from your eyes and mouth
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**45 × 45 × 60 cm** L × W × H for 4 adults
Temperature, day	**24-28 °C**
Temperature, night	**20-22 °C**
Humidity	**50-80%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Optional** Ferguson zone 1
Diet	**Insects**
Kept	**Singly, in pairs or in groups**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Development	**Tadpoles in water**
Egg-laying site	**On leaves over water**
Eggs per clutch	**38-100**
Hatching	**5-14 days** at 23-25 °C
Larval period	**40-90 days** from hatching to metamorphosis
Larval diet	**Algae/plants and complete diet**
Parental care	**None**

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Pithecopus hypochondrialis is a long, slender, long-legged leaf frog of 3-5 cm. The back is green, but the flanks, thighs and lower legs are bright orange with black cross-bars, which give it a tiger-like appearance. The eyes are large with a vertical slit pupil, as in the other leaf frogs of the family. The frog walks slowly and purposefully through the branches, gripping them with fingers and toes, but can jump quite far when it does hop.

Males call at night, while females are silent. The frog can change colour relatively quickly and uses this at night as camouflage against predators when it sits among grass and leaves.

The species was described in 1800 by Daudin and for many years went by the name *Phyllomedusa hypochondrialis*. The genus name *Pithecopus* is the one in use today. The southernmost population, in the Gran Chaco, is now regarded as a separate species, *Pithecopus azureus*, so older care advice under the one name may cover both forms. In captivity *P. hypochondrialis* is one of the most commonly bred leaf frogs.

The skin secretes a substance with biologically active peptides, which the frog makes itself in its skin glands. Captive-bred animals produce it too, so the toxin does not disappear in captivity. How much the secretion bothers humans on ordinary contact is not known, so treat the skin toxin as mild and be careful: wash your hands before and after contact, and do not touch your eyes, mouth or open wounds.

Lifespan in captivity is probably 5-8 years, as in related leaf frogs.

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

Distribution and habitat

Pithecopus hypochondrialis lives in the northern and central parts of South America east of the Andes: Brazil, where most records lie, as well as Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana. In Brazil it has been found from the Amazon region in the north and down through the cerrado of the central part of the country. It has been recorded at elevations up to around 1,500 m.

The southern limit of the range is unclear, because frogs in the Gran Chaco are now assigned to *P. azureus*. Records from Argentina and Paraguay therefore probably belong to that species and are not counted here. The same applies to uncertain records in Bolivia.

> **Native range:** Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana.

HABITAT

Pithecopus hypochondrialis is a flexible species that is found in many kinds of habitat: dry forest, humid lowland forest, scrub, savanna and seasonally flooded grassland, by temporary ponds and marshes. It has also been found in pastures, plantations, gardens and towns, and thus tolerates disturbed surroundings.

The frog is nocturnal and sits in bushes and other plants, often near water. Males sit by temporary ponds and call to the females in the rainy season, and the eggs are laid on leaves over water. The alternating dry season and rainy season is the key to getting the species to breed in the enclosure.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

For a pair or a small group of up to four animals, a tall enclosure of 45 × 45 × 60 cm (length × width × height) is a good size, and bigger is always better. A breeding group with several males needs more space, e.g. 60 × 45 × 90 cm. Height is more important than floor area, because the species lives in bushes and plants.

Furnish with many horizontal and sloping branches and plants with broad, smooth leaves that the frog can sleep under by day and later lay eggs on. Philodendron and pothos are hardy and well suited. Damp kitchen paper can be used as substrate, but it must be changed often, or you can lay a layer of sphagnum. For breeding a semi-sterile set-up is often best: a glass enclosure with a drain, a false bottom, a water bowl and one or two potted plants, so that roundworms cannot accumulate in the substrate. A naturally planted enclosure also works well. Good ventilation is important, and the lid must be mesh.

TEMPERATURE

Keep 24-28 °C by day. At night the temperature should fall a few degrees, to 20-22 °C. A warm spot is not needed, but you can let a small area under a weak lamp be a couple of degrees warmer so that the frog can choose for itself.

Measure with a thermometer both at the top and at the bottom. If the room is cold in winter, a small heat source controlled by a thermostat may be necessary. Avoid letting the terrarium rise above 30 °C, e.g. in direct sun.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND MISTING

Humidity should be 50-60 % by day and rise to around 70-80 % at night and after misting. Mist the enclosure at least once a day, preferably in the evening, so that the substrate is kept slightly damp, and let it dry out a little during the day. Many leaf frogs dislike being hit directly by the spray, so aim for leaves and walls.

An automatic sprinkler can do the job if it is set to run mostly at night. Use dechlorinated tap water, rainwater or reverse osmosis water. Still, constantly wet air is a bad combination and carries a risk of skin problems, so ensure ventilation and a drier period every day.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

WATER AND WATER QUALITY

Provide a water bowl with a sloping edge or some smooth stones, so that the frog can easily get out again. The frog uses the bowl to sit in at night. Change the water every day, and use dechlorinated tap water or rainwater. The bowl can be shallow, 1-2 cm is plenty, and in a rain chamber for breeding 5-8 cm of water is used, but only with plants and stones where the frogs can get out.

Amphibians absorb substances through the skin, so keep soap, cleaning products and insecticides away from the enclosure. Rinse the bowl thoroughly with hot water when cleaning.

LIGHTING AND UVB

Provide 10-12 hours of light a day with a weak light source over one half of the enclosure and darkness at night. A fluorescent tube suited to plants is plenty, and it also provides light for the plants. UVB is not strictly necessary, and the species' exact needs are not known. If you want to provide UVB, and it is recommended especially for juveniles, use a weak source over part of the enclosure with plenty of shade alongside. Use lamps that give off heat with caution, because they dry the air.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Pithecopus hypochondrialis is an insectivore and takes almost any feeder insect of suitable size: crickets, cockroaches, moths, flies and, now and then, waxworms. The feeder insect should be no wider than the frog's head. Give the food in the evening when the frog is active, and remove leftovers in the morning, so that the feeder insects do not gnaw at the frog while it sleeps.

Juveniles are fed daily, and adults every other day with a few insects. Dust the food alternately with a vitamin mix and calcium with D3, and feed the feeder insects well before they are used. Wild-caught insects can carry parasites and pesticides and must be avoided. The frog often gets used to taking food from tweezers.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Pithecopus hypochondrialis is calm and slow and sleeps by day. At night it is active, climbs, sits in the water bowl and hunts. By day it mostly sits still, so it can be picked up without problems, but all handling stresses an amphibian, so keep it to a minimum. Use clean, moist hands, and wash them afterwards, because the skin secretion can cause irritation.

The species can be kept singly, in pairs or in small groups. Keep it only with its own species. If you want to breed, a group with several males per female gives the best chance. Males call at night after the light has been switched off.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Males call at night, while females are silent. Females are probably larger and rounder than males, as in related leaf frogs. Juveniles grow quickly when fed daily and are probably adult in under a year, as in related species. Breed only healthy, well-kept animals that have been in the enclosure for some time, because breeding is a strain on newly bought animals. Females must be well fed to develop eggs.

MATING

The species breeds when the transition from dry season to rainy season is imitated. First temperature and humidity are kept stable or slightly cooler and drier for about 4-5 weeks. Then the enclosure is misted heavily several times a day, and the lid is partly covered with glass or foil, so that the humidity rises. At the same time the frogs are fed every evening with varied food for a week or more, until the females are round and the males call regularly.

In related species a group with more males than females, e.g. six males and three or four females, gives the best results. When the females look full of eggs and the males are calling, the group is moved to a rain chamber, preferably timed to a rainy week. The male grips the female from behind (amplexus) at night.

EGGS AND TADPOLES

A rain chamber is a tall, vertical terrarium with 5-8 cm of water on the bottom, where a small pump lifts the water up to a pipe at the top with many small holes, so that it rains down. The water can be heated to 21-27 °C with a thermostat-controlled heater. The pump can be put on a timer so that it runs for half an hour to several hours each night. Plant philodendron or pothos in pots on the bottom and let the leaves hang over the water, so that the frogs have leaves to lay on.

The female folds the eggs in between two or three leaves above the water and glues the edges together with egg-free jelly. The number of eggs per clutch is not known for the species; expect 38-100 eggs, normally about 70, as in the related *Callimedusa tomopterna*. Check for eggs every day, as they can be hard to see among the plants. If nothing happens after one to two weeks, move the frogs back to the ordinary terrarium, feed them heavily for a few weeks and try again. Do not be discouraged if it does not work the first time.

METAMORPHOSIS

The eggs hatch after 5-14 days, depending on the temperature. Both the hatching time and the larval period below apply to leaf frogs in general. You can either remove the leaf with the eggs and hang it over water in a plastic box at about 24 °C, so that the eggs are not fully under water, or remove the adult frogs from the rain chamber and let the tadpoles fall into the water. If some eggs end up in the water, they usually develop normally.

The tadpoles are free swimmers. Keep them in a tall aquarium or a tray with filtered water at 24-27 °C and plants such as Java moss for cover. Change 25-50 % of the water at least once a week, and more often in a tray without a filter. For the first period give fine powdered food on the water surface twice a day and then fish flakes, as much as they eat in a couple of hours. The larval period is 40-90 days.

When the front legs appear, the newly metamorphosed froglets are moved to a small container with about 1 cm of water and a couple of leaves, so that they can sit without drowning. When the tail has been absorbed, they move on to dry land.

Read more: Rearing tadpoles

REARING THE YOUNG

When the tail is gone, the small frogs are moved to a small set-up with damp kitchen paper or sphagnum, a small water bowl and a couple of plants. Use pot shards or plant pots as perches, as they are easy to keep clean. Mist daily.

The first meal is a couple of flies or small crickets of about 3-6 mm, dusted with vitamins and calcium. Give too little rather than too much at a time, because too many or too large feeder insects stress the small frogs and can cause rectal prolapse. Feed every evening or every other evening. Keep the temperature as for the adults, and offer a weak UVB source. The froglets grow quickly when fed well.

Health and common mistakes

Pithecopus hypochondrialis is hardy when temperature and humidity are reasonable, but there are some typical problems:

- Roundworms, e.g. lungworm, and other parasites, which can accumulate in the substrate, especially in a damp enclosure. A semi-sterile set-up with a false bottom and drain prevents this. Treatment must be done with a vet who knows amphibians.
- Sores on the snout from rubbing against the glass in an enclosure that is too small or during transport. They usually heal with antibiotic ointment on a vet's advice.
- Still, wet air without a drier period, which causes skin infections. Ensure ventilation and let the enclosure dry out every day.
- A lack of calcium and D3, which causes brittle bones. Dust the food alternately with vitamins and calcium with D3.
- Rectal prolapse in small juveniles if the food is too large or too much.
- Skin damage from soap, cream and chemicals on hands or in the enclosure.

Never give anti-parasite medication without a vet's instructions. Some products that are harmless to other animals are deadly to amphibians. See a vet if the frog loses weight, does not eat or has skin injuries.

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.