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GECKOS

Yellow-headed gecko

Gonatodes albogularis

A small, diurnal gecko from Central America, Colombia, Venezuela and the large Caribbean islands. The male has a yellow to orange-yellow head and a dark body, while the female is brown-spotted. The species has no adhesive lamellae, but climbs and hunts in daylight and suits a densely planted, tall enclosure well.

Family: Sphaerodactylidae Former name: *Gymnodactylus albogularis*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**7-10 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**5-10 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal**
Habitat	**Dry forest and rainforest**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**40 × 30 × 45 cm** L × W × H for 2 adults
Temperature, day	**24-28 °C**
Basking spot	**28-30 °C**
Temperature, night	**20-23 °C**
Humidity	**60-80%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Optional**
Diet	**Insects and small invertebrates (springtails, fruit flies)**
Kept	**Singly or in pairs**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Sexually mature	**10-12 months**
Clutch size	**1 eggs**
Incubation	**60-100 days** at 26-28 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Gonatodes albogularis is a small gecko of 7-10 cm including the tail. It is strongly sexually dimorphic. The male has a yellow to orange-yellow head, often with blue tones on the throat, and a dark grey to bluish body. The female and the young are far more discreetly coloured: brownish with dark, marbled spots. Males begin to change colour at the age of 4-8 months and have their final colours at around 9 months.

The species lacks the adhesive lamellae under the toes that many geckos use to climb on glass. Instead it has ordinary claws, round pupils and no movable eyelids. It runs easily up rough cork and bark, but not up glass. Because it is active by day, it is easy to observe.

The species was described in 1836. The species name comes from the Latin words albus (white) and gula (throat) and refers to the white throats of the animals from which the species was described. Four subspecies are distinguished, but the delimitation is disputed: *G. a. fuscus* is regarded by some as a separate species, and for animals from Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras the subspecies is unclear. Animals in the trade are often sold as *G. a. fuscus*.

Males are territorial and defend their area. It is a small, fast and somewhat shy gecko that is suited to being watched, not to being handled.

Distribution and habitat

Gonatodes albogularis occurs across much of Central America and northern South America and on several Caribbean islands. On the mainland it lives in Mexico (Chiapas and Veracruz), Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, in Colombia and in Venezuela. On the islands it is found on Hispaniola (mainly western Haiti), Jamaica, Grand Cayman and Cuba, where it is debated, however, whether the population is native.

The distribution is not fully resolved. The records from Martinique, Trinidad and Tobago and Belize are doubtful, and on Aruba and Curaçao the species is thought to be introduced. A population in southern Florida, introduced in the early 1900s, appears to have died out in the 1990s. Which subspecies live where is unclear in many places.

> **Native range:** Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica and Cayman Islands.

HABITAT

The species is found in both dry and humid lowland forest and in semi-arid regions, from sea level up into lower mountain regions. It sits on tree trunks, branches, rock faces and stone walls and hides under bark, stones and dead wood. It is also seen in gardens, on plantations and on walls of houses, as long as there are vertical surfaces to climb on and small insects to hunt.

The female lays eggs singly in crevices in bark, in hollows in wood and in the leaf litter at the foot of trees, where several females often use the same place. Eggs are laid all year, but far fewer in the dry season from December to May. The climate is warm with small temperature variations through the year, but with a distinct alternation between dry season and rainy season.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

The species thrives in a vertical enclosure. A single adult gecko can be kept in around 30 × 30 × 45 cm (length × width × height), and a pair needs at least 40 × 30 × 45 cm. Bigger is better, because active animals use the whole space. Height is just as important as floor area.

Cover the back wall and one side wall with cork, so that the animals have rough surfaces to run on, and add vertical and horizontal branches, cork tubes and shorter pieces of bark as hides. Dense planting with, for example, pothos, bromeliads and tillandsias provides calm, shade and droplets to drink from. The animals are shyer than day geckos of the genus *Phelsuma* and show themselves mostly when there are many hiding places.

A mix of soil and sand in the ratio 1:1 works as substrate, ideally with a layer of leaves. If the substrate is kept slightly damp, it helps maintain humidity. Heavy stones and roots must stand firmly directly on the bottom of the enclosure, so that nothing topples. The young are tiny, so check all crevices, doors and ventilation holes, because the animals can escape through very small openings.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

TEMPERATURE

Gonatodes albogularis needs 24-28 °C during the day. A small warmer area of 28-30 °C is fine, but the species hardly basks at all, and there must always be cooler, shaded places to retreat to. The light from the tubes is often the only heat source needed, so a heat lamp is only an advantage in a cold room.

At night the temperature may fall to 20-23 °C. The enclosure is small, so the temperature changes quickly. Measure it with a digital thermometer, and do not use heat rocks or powerful spotlights, which can overheat the animals. In winter the females can be given a cool resting period; see the section on breeding.

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be 60-80%, and there must be good ventilation. Mist the enclosure once a day, so that there are droplets on leaves, cork and panes that the geckos can drink from. Let the substrate and the branches dry out partially between mistings, so that mould does not develop. Constantly wet conditions are not good.

Also place a small, low dish of fresh water in the enclosure, and change the water regularly. A hygrometer shows whether the routine is working.

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species is diurnal and needs light for 11-13 hours a day. T5 daylight tubes give both light and a little heat and are enough on their own. UVB is not necessary when the food is supplemented with D3, but a weak UVB tube with good shade zones can be used for adult animals, especially breeding females.

Do not use UVB for newly hatched young and juveniles, because it can cause problems with shedding. Let the young grow up under ordinary fluorescent tubes or bulbs.

Read more: Lighting and UVB Read more: Calcium, vitamins and supplements

FEEDING

The species lives on small insects and other prey that are smaller than the distance between the animal's eyes. Adults can be given small crickets, wingless fruit flies, small cockroaches, houseflies, moths, firefly larvae and small mealworms. Springtails and small woodlice provide variety, and in summer it can be supplemented with small insects caught with a net in the meadow. The animals do not lick sweet nectar.

Feed adults 3-4 times a week and young daily. Newly hatched young are only about 25 mm long and need newly hatched crickets, fruit flies and springtails. Dust the feeder insects with calcium and a vitamin supplement with D3, and let the feeder insects eat good food before feeding. Egg-laying females have a great need for calcium, so keep a small dish of crushed cuttlebone or calcium powder available.

Read more: Feeder animals: keeping and breeding

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

The species is shyer than day geckos of the genus *Phelsuma*, but is often seen, especially at feeding. It should not be handled. It is small and fast, and a single jump or a fall can cause an injury or an escape.

Keep a pair or a single gecko. Males are territorial and fight with both males and females, so more than one male in the same enclosure leads to strife. Even two females can bite each other and should only be kept together in a large enclosure. Watch the animals, and remove one of them if it is stressed, chased or loses its tail.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The sexes can be recognised by colour. The male gets a yellow to orange head and dark body, while the female remains brown-spotted. The young look like the female, and the male begins to change colour at the age of 4-8 months. The animals are sexually mature at the age of 10-12 months, but females should not be put to breeding until they are at least 12-14 months old. Earlier breeding can cost the female her life.

MATING

The animals are kept in pairs. Put the female together with the male in a well-furnished enclosure with many hides, so that she can withdraw. Breeding is normally unproblematic, and the animals reproduce easily.

A cool resting period in winter can help. Keep the females separate from the males at no more than 24 °C by day and around 18 °C at night. How long the rest should last is not documented for the species.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays one egg at a time, every third to fourth week through the season. She buries it in the substrate or hides it under bark, in a hollow in cork or in another dry, hidden place. How many eggs a female lays per year is not documented.

Give her several dry hiding places to choose from, for example cork tubes and loose bark, so that the eggs are easy to find. Egg laying draws on the calcium reserves, so always keep calcium available.

INCUBATION

Remove the egg carefully without turning it, and place it in a small box with slightly moist substrate in an incubator at 26-28 °C. At 26-28 °C the egg hatches after 60-100 days. Incubation in the enclosure itself takes longer.

Eggs that collapse or turn mouldy are usually infertile or dead. Place each new egg in a clean box.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are around 25-35 mm long at hatching. Keep them in small, humid enclosures with bark, cork and plants, and mist daily. They eat small fruit flies, springtails and newly hatched crickets, dusted with calcium and vitamins. Do not use UVB for them.

The young can be kept singly or in small groups of the same size, but must be separated if the males begin to show colours and fight. Young males get their full colours at around 9 months of age.

Health and common mistakes

The species is hardy and reproduces easily, but its small size makes faults in care important. The typical problems are:

- Too little calcium and D3, especially in breeding females. This causes soft bones and weakened females. Keep calcium available, and dust the food.
- Feeder insects that are too large, which the animals cannot swallow and which can bite them.
- Shedding problems in young, especially if they are kept under UV light or at too low humidity.
- A constantly wet substrate and poor ventilation, which cause mould and skin problems.
- Fights and stress if several males or females are kept together. Bites and lost tails are signs that the animals must be separated.
- Intestinal parasites, especially in imported animals, which can cause emaciation and poor appetite. Have a faecal sample examined if the animal loses weight.

A healthy animal is active in the daytime, has clear eyes, a plump tail base and a good grip. See a vet with experience in reptiles if the animal loses weight, does not eat, sits with closed eyes by day or cannot climb normally.

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.