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GECKOS

Pristurus crucifer

Pristurus crucifer is a small, ground-dwelling gecko from the Horn of Africa and south-western Arabia. The body measures no more than about 4 cm from snout to vent. Like most of the genus, it is active by day, and it needs heat, strong light and UVB. The species is rare in captivity, so its care is based on close relatives.

Family: Sphaerodactylidae Former name: *Gymnodactylus crucifer; Pristurus stefaninii*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**4 cm** snout-vent length
Lifespan	**5-10 years**
Active	**By day and at dusk**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial**
Habitat	**Semi-desert and savanna**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**60 × 40 × 40 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**28-30 °C**
Basking spot	**38-42 °C**
Temperature, night	**20-23 °C**
Humidity	**30-40%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Essential** Ferguson zone 3
Diet	**Insects and small invertebrates (springtails, fruit flies)**
Kept	**Singly or in pairs**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Clutch size	**1-2 eggs**
Incubation	**70-90 days** at 28 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Pristurus crucifer is a small, slender gecko in the genus *Pristurus*, in which almost all species are active by day. It reaches at most about 40 mm from snout to vent and is thus considerably smaller than *Pristurus carteri*. The species name is formed from the Latin crux (cross) and ferre (to carry) and means cross-bearer.

The sexes can be told apart by the tail: in adult males it is keeled on both the upper and lower side, whereas in females it is round or keeled only on the upper side. Young males have the same tail as the females.

The species was described in 1861 under the name *Gymnodactylus crucifer* and is today placed in *Pristurus*. *Pristurus stefaninii* and the subspecies laticephalus have been merged with it, while *Pristurus longipes*, which was formerly included, is now a separate species. Records from Socotra are probably based on confusion with *Pristurus sokotranus*, which varies greatly in colour and pattern.

Little is known about the species' life in captivity.

Distribution and habitat

Pristurus crucifer lives in the Horn of Africa and south-western Arabia: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, north-eastern Kenya and south-western Saudi Arabia. The type locality is in Ethiopia. The species is found from the lowlands near the coast up to at least 1,100 m above sea level.

The species is assessed as Least Concern on the global IUCN Red List. Population size is not documented.

> **Native range:** Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya.

HABITAT

Pristurus crucifer lives on the ground in dry, hot country with scattered vegetation. It is active by day and at dusk and hunts as a sit-and-wait predator: it sits still at a lookout point and strikes when an insect passes by.

The climate in the range is hot and dry for most of the year with short rainy seasons. Temperatures and humidity at the species' localities are not documented.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Little is known about the care of *Pristurus crucifer*. The climate in the range is hot and dry, and the species lives on the ground and hunts from a lookout in the sun. The care and the figures in the box are based on the better-known *Pristurus carteri*. *Pristurus flavipunctatus* lives in part of the same area.

One adult needs an enclosure of at least 60 × 40 × 40 cm. Floor area matters more than height, because the species lives on the ground. A pair needs more space and many hides, so the male does not harass the female. A glass or PVC enclosure holds the dryness and heat best.

Furnish with flat stones, slate and roots, so there are lookout points and basking spots at several heights and hides at both the warm and the cool end. Stones should sit directly on the floor and preferably be glued, so they cannot slip if the animal digs under them. Use a substrate of fine sand mixed with soil, so the female can lay eggs. The enclosure needs good ventilation and a tight-fitting lid, because the species is small and fast.

TEMPERATURE

Create a clear gradient. The cool end is kept at 28-30 °C, and under a spotlight a basking spot of 38-42 °C is made. At night the temperature can fall to 20-23 °C without extra heat.

Use digital thermometers at both ends and an infrared thermometer to measure the basking spot itself. Control the heat lamp with a thermostat, and make sure there is always a cooler area. If the animal constantly seeks shade or gapes, it is too hot.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

The air should be dry, about 30-40 %. A dry substrate and good ventilation keep the humidity down, and a hygrometer shows whether the level holds.

Provide a very shallow bowl of fresh water, changed daily, and put a few stones in it so small animals cannot drown. Mist the furnishings lightly once a week, and let them dry out again. A small hide with slightly damp moss helps during shedding and egg laying.

LIGHTING AND UVB

Pristurus crucifer is active by day and basks, so light matters greatly. Provide strong daylight and a UVB tube, for example a T5 tube with 10-12 % UVB, above the basking spot. UVB is necessary, because it provides vitamin D3 and prevents bone disease. Ferguson zone 3 suits a diurnal desert gecko that basks, but the zone has not been measured for the species.

Keep the light on 12 hours a day in the summer half of the year and 9-10 hours in winter, controlled by a timer. Replace the UVB tube according to the manufacturer's instructions, as the output falls even though the tube still lights up.

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

FEEDING

The species feeds on insects. Offer small feeder insects: springtails, fruit flies, small crickets and newly hatched cockroaches. Prey must not be wider than the distance between the animal's eyes. Give one or a few insects at a time, so the gecko can hunt them from its lookout.

Young animals are fed daily and adults every second or third day with what they can eat in 15-20 minutes. Remove the remainder afterwards. The feeder insects must themselves have been fed greens or prepared feed. Dust them with calcium at every second or third feeding and with vitamins a couple of times a month; young animals and breeding females need calcium more often.

Read more: Feeder animals: keeping and breeding

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Pristurus crucifer is a small, fast and wary animal that is not suited to handling. The tail can break off if you grab it. Pick the animal up only when necessary.

The genus uses the tail to signal, and males are territorial towards each other. Two males are therefore not kept together. Singly or as a pair in a spacious enclosure with many hides is the safest solution. Separate the animals at once if the female is being chased.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Age and size at sexual maturity are not documented for the species. Males are recognised by the keeled underside of the tail and by the hemipenal bulges at the base of the tail. Wait with breeding until the animals are fully grown.

MATING

Mating behaviour and any rest period are not documented for the species. A shorter day and slightly cooler temperatures in winter give a yearly rhythm that suits the climate. Watch the first meeting between the male and the female, and remove the male if he chases the female persistently.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays 1-2 hard-shelled eggs at a time, most often only one. How many times she lays a year is not documented. Give her a laying box with at least 10 cm of slightly damp sand, and provide plenty of calcium and food.

INCUBATION

The eggs are incubated at 28 °C and hatch after 70-90 days. Move them carefully, without turning them, to a small box with slightly damp vermiculite or perlite. In *Pristurus carteri* the sex of the young depends on temperature, so keep it steady throughout incubation.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

Growth and rearing are not documented for the species. The hatchlings are small and are given the smallest feeders, such as springtails, fruit flies and newly hatched crickets, daily and dusted with calcium. They need a small, tight faunarium or a small enclosure with hides, a warm spot, UVB and a very shallow water bowl, separate from the adults.

Health and common mistakes

No diseases specific to *Pristurus crucifer* in captivity have been documented. The typical mistakes for small, diurnal desert geckos are:

- Too little UVB and calcium, which can cause soft bones and tremors.
- Too high humidity and poor ventilation, which cause skin and respiratory problems.
- Overheating under a lamp that is too strong without a cool area.
- Lost tail. The tail is dropped in response to stress or restraint and regrows only partially.
- Shed remains on toes and tail tip. If there are remains, put the animal in a box with wet kitchen paper for a couple of hours.
- Mites, which can sit in pockets in the armpits. Look for small red or orange dots.

A healthy animal is fast and wary and has clear eyes and a plump tail. See a vet with reptile experience if the animal loses weight or stops eating.

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.