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GECKOS

Common Barking Gecko

Ptenopus garrulus

A small, sand-coloured gecko from the Kalahari that lives in self-dug burrows in the sand and only comes out at sunset. The males sit at the burrow entrance and call with a sharp, barking sound that carries a long way. Little is known about the care of the species.

Family: Gekkonidae Former name: *Stenodactylus garrulus*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**7-9 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**6-10 years**
Active	**At dusk and at night**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial and burrowing**
Habitat	**Desert, semi-desert and savanna**
Difficulty	**Experienced**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**60 × 40 × 30 cm** L × W × H for 2 adults
Temperature, day	**24-28 °C**
Basking spot	**32-35 °C**
Temperature, night	**18-22 °C**
Humidity	**30-50%**
UVB	**Optional** Ferguson zone 1
Winter rest	**18-21 °C** 6-8 weeks
Diet	**Insects**
Kept	**Singly or in pairs**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Clutch size	**1 eggs**
Incubation	**60-80 days** at 28-30 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Ptenopus garrulus is a small, slender gecko. The body averages 47 mm and is at most 53 mm from snout to vent, and the tail is about two thirds of the body length, so the animal measures around 7-9 cm in total. The toes have long, pointed fringes of scales along the sides, and under the hands and feet there are pink, unpigmented scales. The belly is white.

The colour follows the colour of the sand and varies between brick red, cream white, grey and greyish brown. Along the back there are pale spots in two or more rows, which can merge into irregular bands, and on the tail there are pale and dark crossbands. Males have a strong yellow, heart-shaped patch on the throat, which can spread out onto the sides of the head and the forelegs.

The male's call consists of 4-6 short, rapid notes lasting less than a second in all. The notes are high-pitched, with the main emphasis around 4 kHz. The call is used to attract females and keep other males away, and in the wild it can be heard several hundred metres away.

The species was described in 1849 under the genus *Stenodactylus*. The genus name *Ptenopus* comes from Greek and means 'feather foot', because the toes have fringes, and the species name *garrulus* is Latin for 'talkative'. Since 2025 *P. garrulus* includes only the population in the greater Kalahari. The former subspecies *Ptenopus maculatus* is now a separate species, and four new species have been split from it, so older information about *P. garrulus* may cover several species.

Distribution and habitat

Ptenopus garrulus is found in the greater Kalahari in southern Africa, in Namibia, Botswana and South Africa. The range is large, about 923,000 km², and the species is the most widespread of the genus's nine species. It is not found in the Namib Desert or in the adjoining area towards the coast, where other species of the genus *Ptenopus* take over.

The range extends from Etosha in northern Namibia to the Northern Cape province in South Africa. The outline on the map is rough. Older records from other parts of Namibia and southern Africa belong to the species that were formerly counted under *P. garrulus*.

> **Native range:** Botswana, Namibia and South Africa.

HABITAT

The gecko lives on sandy ground in dry and semi-arid regions where more than about 150 and less than 550 mm of rain falls a year. It is found on sand plains, between dunes and on vegetated dunes and sand mounds, but usually not on steep dunes. Only rarely has it been found on firmer, silty ground.

The gecko digs complex burrows where it spends most of its life and where both mating and egg-laying take place. By day it sits hidden in the burrow, and the males call from the burrow entrance after sunset, usually for 20-40 minutes, beginning about 20 minutes after sunset. The calls are linked to the breeding season, which begins in June in the northernmost area and only in September-October in the south. After rain the males also call outside the season, and then often throughout the night.

The gecko eats termites, ants and beetles.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Little is known about the care of *Ptenopus garrulus*. The advice is based on the species' way of life and on small desert geckos with the same way of life, *Stenodactylus sthenodactylus* and *Stenodactylus petrii*. The figures for temperature, humidity, winter rest, incubation time and lifespan are borrowed from them.

A pair needs a long, low enclosure of at least 60 × 40 × 30 cm (length × width × height). Floor area is what counts, because the gecko lives on the ground. Bigger is better, especially if there is to be room for several burrows.

The substrate is the whole setup. Use fine, clean natural sand in a layer at least 10 cm deep so the gecko can dig a proper burrow, and mix in a little soil or peat so the burrows do not collapse. Lay flat pieces of cork or stone on the sand, and set them so they cannot slide down over a digging animal. Keep the sand dry at one end and slightly moist at the other so the animal can choose for itself. The enclosure needs good ventilation. It is best to place it where the sound of the male's call will not be a nuisance, because it can be loud.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation Read more: Incubating eggs

TEMPERATURE

Provide a gradient so the animal can choose for itself. By day the temperature should be 24-28 °C, and an area of about a third of the floor is heated to 32-35 °C. At night it should fall to 18-22 °C. The large difference between day and night suits a desert climate.

Heat the floor with a heat mat or heat cable under one end so there is always cool sand to dig into. Fit a thermostat, and measure the temperature down in the sand, because that is where the gecko spends the day. A weak heat bulb over one end can supplement. The animal must be able to withdraw from the heat by digging deeper.

For a cooler rest period in winter, see the section on mating.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Keep the air dry and well ventilated, at around 30-50% relative humidity.

Mist lightly at one end of the enclosure, in the evening before the gecko comes out, so the animal can drink droplets and feel a little moisture. The sand should only become damp at the surface, and the damp part should be dry again by the next day. Never wet the whole floor. Dry, hot conditions without a damp spot can dehydrate the animals.

A shallow dish of fresh water is a good supplement. A hygrometer shows whether the air stays dry.

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species is active at sunset and at night and spends the day buried, so UVB is not essential when the insects are dusted with calcium and vitamin D3. If you want to provide UVB, use a weak tube (Ferguson zone 1) over part of the enclosure, and leave the rest in shade.

Keep the light on for 12 hours a day, and keep the night dark. For a winter rest the day length is reduced along with the temperature.

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

FEEDING

The gecko is an insectivore. In the wild it takes termites, ants and beetles, and it sits at the burrow entrance and hunts nearby. Small crickets and small roaches make a good staple. Feeder insects must not be longer than the distance between the animal's eyes.

Adults are fed two to three times a week, preferably after sunset, and juveniles every day with the very smallest insects, such as newly hatched crickets. Dust the insects regularly with calcium and vitamin D3, and give vitamins and minerals once a week. Mist the enclosure lightly just before feeding, because it can encourage the animals to come out. Remove uneaten insects afterwards.

Read more: Feeder animals: keeping and breeding

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

The gecko is shy and spends most of its life in a burrow in the sand. Handle it only when it has to be moved, and never grab the tail. Take care, because the animal is small and fragile.

In the wild each animal has its own burrow, and in this genus males living close together often fight. Therefore keep the animals singly, or put one male with one female in a roomy enclosure with space for several burrows and hides. Never keep two males together. Separate the animals if you see chasing, biting, weight loss or an animal that stays away from the food.

The males call after sunset from the burrow entrance.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Males can be recognised by the yellow, heart-shaped throat patch. Age and weight at sexual maturity are not documented for the species.

Keep the sexes apart until the animals are fully grown, and only breed a female when she is in good condition. A young, light animal that produces eggs risks being drained of calcium.

MATING

In the wild mating goes with the calling season, which lasts from June in the north to September-October in the south. The male calls from his burrow to attract the female. In some species of the genus *Ptenopus* the female responds with soft sounds or movements such as scraping and head-nodding as she approaches, and mating takes place inside the male's burrow.

Give a cool period of about six to eight weeks at 18-21 °C, with a shorter light period and sparse feeding, ideally with the male and female kept apart. The period is borrowed from *Stenodactylus*. When the temperature is raised again, mating can begin. Put the male and female together in an enclosure with many burrows, and observe.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays one egg per clutch, but a new egg can develop soon after the first. The eggs are laid inside the burrow. Females with eggs are seen in the wild from August to January. How many clutches the species lays per year is not documented.

Give the female plenty of calcium and insects throughout the season, and keep an eye on her weight. The eggs of the related desert geckos have a thin, hard shell and are fragile. Dig them out gently with a soft brush or your fingers, and do not turn them.

INCUBATION

Move the eggs to a small box of dry sand or vermiculite, and place the box inside a larger box of moist substrate, so that the air around the eggs is humid without the eggs themselves lying wet. Condensation must not drip onto them.

Incubate at 28-30 °C. The incubation time is not documented for the species; 60-80 days is borrowed from *Stenodactylus*, and the eggs hatch fastest at the high temperature. In the wild, newly hatched animals have been recorded from October to May.

REARING THE YOUNG

Newly hatched animals measure under 32 mm from snout to vent, and the smallest recorded are around 24 mm. Keep them like the adults, but in a small box with fine sand, a hide and light misting every day.

Give the very smallest insects, such as newly hatched crickets and small springtails, every day and dust them with calcium. Keep the young in groups of the same size, and separate them if any fall behind. Growth and age at sexual maturity are not documented for the species, so weigh them regularly.

Health and common mistakes

The typical faults in care are:

- Overheating. The gecko avoids heat by burrowing, so heat everywhere and no cool sand to retreat into is the most obvious fault.
- Dehydration. Dry, hot conditions without a damp spot can dehydrate the animals. The signs are sunken eyes, lethargy and poor sheds. Provide a slightly damp spot under a hide and a shallow water dish.
- Too much moisture. Wet sand causes mould and skin problems. The surface should dry out during the day.
- Calcium deficiency (metabolic bone disease), especially in juveniles and breeding females. The signs are tremors, bent limbs and a soft jaw. Use calcium with vitamin D3.
- Sand impaction. Use fine, clean sand, and avoid coarse material that the animal might swallow by accident.
- Retained shed on the toes and tail tip. Provide a little damp sand under a hide, and loosen the remains gently.
- Lost tails. This is not dangerous, but the tail never regains its original shape.

See a reptile vet if the animal loses weight, does not eat for several weeks or is limp.

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.