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GECKOS

Ocellated gecko

Sphaerodactylus argus

A small, diurnal dwarf gecko from Jamaica and the islands of San Andrés and Providencia, only just over 6 cm long including the tail. *Sphaerodactylus argus* is brownish with yellow dots and lines on the head, lives in dry forest and leaf litter and can be kept in pairs in a small, secure enclosure.

Family: Sphaerodactylidae Former name: *Sphaerodactylus argus andresensis*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**6 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**10-20 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal and terrestrial**
Habitat	**Dry forest**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**20 × 20 × 20 cm** L × W × H for 2 adults
Temperature, day	**24-28 °C**
Temperature, night	**18-22 °C**
Humidity	**50-60%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Optional**
Diet	**Insects and small invertebrates (springtails, fruit flies)**
Kept	**Singly or in pairs**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Sexually mature	**6-10 months**
Clutch size	**1 eggs**
Incubation	**100 days** at 28 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Sphaerodactylus argus is one of the medium-sized species in the genus: adults measure up to 33 mm from snout to vent and just over 6 cm including the tail, which is about as long as the body. The body is compact and stocky. The female is light brown, and the head has yellow dots that sometimes merge into lines from the snout to the nape. The tail is yellowish brown with dark marbling. The male resembles the female, but the pattern on the head is more faded. The young have far more contrast: light lines from the head to the tail on a dark background and a reddish brown tail.

The species name refers to the giant Argus in Greek mythology, who had many eyes, and points to the eye-like spots. The species was described from Jamaica in 1850 by Philip Henry Gosse. Two subspecies are regarded as valid: *S. a. argus* and *S. a. andresensis*, which was described from San Andrés in 1950.

Like other dwarf geckos, the animal has adhesive lamellae under the toes and can climb on glass, so the enclosure must be completely secure. Lifespan in captivity is not documented; the 10-20 years in the box is borrowed from *Sphaerodactylus elegans* and is uncertain.

Distribution and habitat

Sphaerodactylus argus was described from Jamaica, and the subspecies *S. a. andresensis* lives on San Andrés and Providencia in the western Caribbean, which belong to Colombia. The species also occurs on Cuba, but whether the population there is native has not been resolved.

The species has been introduced to Bimini and New Providence in the Bahamas, the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico, Great Corn Island off Nicaragua, Bocas del Toro in Panama and the Florida Keys, where it was first seen on Key West in 1944. The map shows only Jamaica and the Colombian islands.

> **Native range:** Jamaica and Colombia.

HABITAT

Sphaerodactylus argus lives in dry to semi-dry forest from sea level up to about 100 m. It stays mostly near the ground, in the leaf litter, under rotting wood and in other hiding places close to the floor, but it also climbs and is seen on walls and in buildings. The species is active during the day.

The climate in its range is tropical and warm all year. Because the habitat is drier than for many other species in the genus, the enclosure should not be as humid either.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Little is known about the care of *Sphaerodactylus argus*, but the species is easy to keep and breed. It is kept like the related *Sphaerodactylus elegans* and *Sphaerodactylus macrolepis*, though a little drier.

A pair needs an enclosure of at least 20 × 20 × 20 cm (length × width × height). A larger enclosure, e.g. 30 × 30 × 30 cm, gives room for more hides and microclimates. The enclosure must be completely tight, including the lid, because the gecko is so small that it escapes through very small gaps, and because it climbs glass.

Use a substrate of coconut fibre or a mixture of soil and sand, preferably with small woodlice that live in the substrate. Place pieces of cork and dry leaves as hides, and plant small climbing plants such as *Pilea*. Stand bark and pieces of hollow plant stems, e.g. Japanese knotweed, at an angle up the walls, so the animals can climb. Drill a hole in the stems, so the females can use them as egg-laying sites. Heavy stones and pieces of wood must stand directly on the bottom of the enclosure, so the animal cannot be crushed.

TEMPERATURE

By day the temperature should be 26-28 °C and by night 20-22 °C. In winter the daytime temperature may fall to 24 °C and the night temperature to 18 °C. A fluorescent tube can provide the heat that is needed, so a spotlight is not necessary and can easily overheat a small enclosure. Measure the temperature with a digital thermometer down at the bottom, where the animal spends most of its time.

HUMIDITY AND WATER

The humidity should be 50-60 %, lower than for most other dwarf geckos, because the species lives in dry places. Spraying the enclosure every second day is enough when a small, shallow water bowl is available. The animal also drinks droplets from leaves and panes.

Provide good ventilation, so that the enclosure dries out between sprayings and does not become mouldy. The water bowl must be so shallow that the animal cannot drown in it.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

The gecko is diurnal. Keep the light on for 12 hours a day in spring and summer and 10 hours in winter. A fluorescent tube or a compact fluorescent bulb in daylight colour is enough and at the same time gives the heat that is needed. Live plants may require an LED plant lamp.

The need for UVB is not documented. A weak UVB tube for shade-dwelling animals with plenty of shade can be used but is optional when the feeder animals are dusted with calcium and vitamin D3.

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

FEEDING

The gecko is an insectivore, and all food must be small, no larger than the animal's head. Adults take small crickets, small woodlice, large fruit flies (*Drosophila hydei*), wax moths and wax moth larvae. The young get springtails, newly hatched crickets, small wax moth larvae and small fruit flies (*Drosophila melanogaster*). Alternate between several kinds of food.

Adults are fed 2-3 times a week, young daily. Dust the feeder insects with calcium and vitamins at every feeding, and put out a small dish of crushed cuttlebone, which egg-laying females in particular make use of. It is often harder to obtain enough small feeder insects than to care for the gecko itself, so ensure a stable supply of springtails and small crickets before acquiring the animal.

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Keep the species singly or as a pair. Two males must not be put together, because they fight. How females tolerate one another is not documented for *S. argus*; in *Sphaerodactylus notatus* and *Sphaerodactylus macrolepis* the females are also aggressive towards other adults, so keep at most one pair per enclosure.

The species is active and lively and moves mostly near the ground, but it also climbs. It is too small and fragile for handling. If the animal has to be moved, let it crawl up into a small container.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Males and females look alike. The male can be recognised by the pattern on the head being more faded than the female's distinct yellow dots and lines. The species can reach sexual maturity as early as 6-10 months. Even so, wait until the female is fully grown before putting the pair together for breeding.

MATING

Breeding rarely causes problems. A well-fed pair in an enclosure with many hides mates without special help. In winter the days should be shorter, with 10 hours of light, and the temperature slightly lower: about 24 °C during the day and down to 18 °C at night.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays one small, hard-shelled egg at a time, and when she gets plenty of food she can lay a new one every 18-20 days. The egg is laid in hollow plant stems, behind bark or in the substrate. Therefore stand pieces of hollow stems with a hole in them upright in the enclosure, so the eggs are easy to find.

Remove the eggs and place them in an incubator, so the young do not risk being chased by the adults. Give the female plenty of food and calcium while she lays.

Read more: Incubating eggs

INCUBATION

At a constant temperature of 28 °C the eggs hatch after about 100 days. Place the egg in a small container with air holes and moist vermiculite or perlite, and do not turn it, as with other geckos. The air in the container must be moist, but the egg must not lie wet.

REARING THE YOUNG

The young measure 28-30 mm including the tail at hatching and have far more contrast in colour than the adults. They are reared in a small, secure plastic box of about 1.3 litres furnished like the adults' enclosure: coconut fibre or soil and sand, leaves, hides and a small plant.

Give them springtails, newly hatched crickets and small wax moth larvae, dusted with calcium and vitamins. Finding food that is small enough is the greatest challenge. The young can be reared in small groups, also together with young of other *Sphaerodactylus* species, but divide them if unrest arises.

Health and common mistakes

Sphaerodactylus argus is regarded as easy to keep, but there is little information on diseases in the species. The typical mistakes with small dwarf geckos are:

- Too little calcium and D3, especially in young animals and egg-laying females. Dust the feeder animals.
- An enclosure that is too dry or too wet. Constantly wet conditions cause mould and skin problems.
- A one-sided diet. Alternate between several kinds of feeder animals.
- Heavy items that the animal can be crushed under. Place them directly on the floor.
- Fights between adult animals. Separate them in cases of bites or injuries.

A healthy animal is active, has clear eyes and a plump tail. See a vet with experience in reptiles if the animal loses weight, does not eat or seems lethargic.

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.