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IGUANAS

Emerald Swift

Sceloporus malachiticus

Sceloporus malachiticus is a small, agile lizard from the cool mountain forests of Central America. The male is emerald green with blue belly patches, the female brown with dark spots. The species is diurnal, feeds on insects and both climbs and runs on the ground. It needs a well-lit enclosure with UVB, a warm basking spot, humid air and cooler nights. It gives birth to live young and is difficult to settle in.

Family: Phrynosomatidae

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**15-25 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**3-5 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal, rock-dwelling and terrestrial**
Habitat	**Montane forest and rocky terrain**
Difficulty	**Experienced**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**90 × 45 × 60 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**24-29 °C**
Basking spot	**33-37 °C**
Temperature, night	**16-20 °C**
Humidity	**60-80%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Essential** Ferguson zone 3
Diet	**Insects**
Kept	**Singly or one male with several females**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Live-bearing**
Sexually mature	**12-18 months**
Litter size	**2-10 young**
Gestation	**90-120 days**

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Sceloporus malachiticus is a small to medium-sized lizard with a compact body, long toes and stiff, keeled scales that give it a rough, thorny appearance. The male is shiny green with blue patches on the belly, sometimes with a blue tail, and has a black patch at the shoulder. The female is brown with dark spots and less conspicuous. The species name refers to the male's apple-green "tunic".

Adults grow to 15-25 cm including the tail. The body measures at most about 10 cm from snout to vent in males, and females are about 7 cm. Newborn juveniles are just under 3 cm from snout to vent.

The species was described in 1864 by Edward Drinker Cope. It belongs to the group around *Sceloporus formosus*, and colour and size vary with altitude and population.

The animal is shy and agile and tolerates handling poorly. Most animals in the trade are wild-caught, and the species is seldom bred. Little is known about its care, so several figures in the guide are based on the climate of its range.

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

Distribution and habitat

Sceloporus malachiticus lives in Central America: in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. The species is found in the mountains at altitudes of 830-1,780 metres, where the air is cooler and more humid than in the lowlands. The type locality is the highlands of Costa Rica. Older records from Mexico, Belize and Honduras are unconfirmed and are not shown on the map.

> **Native range:** Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama.

HABITAT

Sceloporus malachiticus lives in humid mountain forest and forest edges. At lower altitudes it stays mostly in trees and on tree trunks, higher up more on rocks and on the ground. It is diurnal and waits for prey from a sunlit branch or stone.

The climate is mild with cool nights. At an altitude of about 900 metres the days are 28-30 °C and the nights about 19 °C all year, and higher up it is cooler. Active animals have a body temperature of 29-33 °C, so they need to get into the sun to warm up. The diet is arthropods and a little foliage. Females give birth to live young.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Little is known about the care of *Sceloporus malachiticus*, and what is known is based largely on the climate of the mountain forests. An adult needs an enclosure of at least 90 × 45 × 60 cm (length × width × height). Larger is better, because the species is lively and uses both the ground and the branches.

The substrate is a 10 cm layer of moisture-retaining soil, for example coconut fibre mixed with garden soil without fertiliser, with a layer of leaf litter on top, which retains moisture and which the animal can dig in. Furnish with several sloping branches and cork at different heights, flat stones as a basking spot and hides on the ground, and dense foliage of living or artificial plants. The enclosure should be well ventilated so that the air does not become stagnant.

Remove droppings daily, and replace the whole substrate every 3-4 months.

Read more: Heat and temperature

TEMPERATURE

Sceloporus malachiticus comes from cooler altitudes and should not be given the high temperatures that the desert species of the genus get. The air should be 24-29 °C during the day. The basking spot should be about 35 °C on the surface, measured with an infrared thermometer. Use a halogen spot over a branch or stone, and avoid ceramic heaters and heat mats.

At night the temperature should fall to 16-20 °C; the figure is an estimate based on the climate of the range. The heat lamp is switched off, and ordinary room temperature is usually suitable at night. The enclosure must not be warm around the clock.

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be 60-80 %. Mist plants and furnishings morning and evening so that there are droplets to drink, and keep the substrate damp but not wet. The air may be most humid at night, and the enclosure should dry out a little during the day. Provide a low bowl of fresh water, and change the water daily.

Stagnant air close to 100 % humidity causes mould and respiratory problems.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

Sceloporus malachiticus is diurnal and basks in the middle of the day, so it needs UVB. Use a T5 HO tube (Ferguson zone 3) in a reflector over the basking spot. The basking spot should be the place closest to the tube, and the distance depends on the strength of the tube and on whether it sits over mesh or inside the enclosure. UVB does not pass through glass or plastic. Replace the tube according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Supplement with a powerful 6,500 K daylight lamp, which also helps living plants. The light should be on for 11 hours in winter and 13 hours in summer and switched off completely at night.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

The species is an insectivore but also eats a little foliage. Give live insects: crickets, cockroaches, small grasshoppers, mealworms, silkworms and black soldier fly larvae, no larger than the animal's head. Vary the diet, and gut-load the feeder insects with a nutritious diet for the final day before they are fed to the lizard.

Juveniles are fed daily, adults 3-4 times a week with as much as they can eat. Dust the feeder insects lightly with calcium at most feedings, and give a vitamin supplement with D3 every 10-14 days for adults and once a week for juveniles. Keep an eye on weight, because newly bought animals easily lose weight.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

The animal is shy and agile and tolerates handling poorly, so handling is kept to a minimum. Never take hold of the tail, because it can break off.

Males are territorial and must not be housed together. One male can be kept with one or more females in a larger enclosure with many hiding places if the animals are to breed; otherwise they are best kept separately. The male displays his blue belly with push-ups. Newly bought animals are difficult to settle in and need peace, warmth, many hiding places and a rich supply of food.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The male is green with blue belly patches and has a thicker tail base and larger femoral pores, the female is brown with dark spots. The animals become sexually mature early, at 12-18 months.

MATING

Captive breeding has scarcely been described. Put a female with a male, and separate them if he bites her too hard. A cool period with shorter days in the winter half of the year suits the climate, but it is not documented that it is necessary.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The species is viviparous. The female gives birth to 2-10 young, on average about 6, and large females have the most. How many litters she has a year is not documented. Give the gravid female plenty of food and calcium and a warm basking spot. Contact a vet if she strains without result or stops eating.

INCUBATION

There are no eggs to incubate. The length of gestation is not documented; 90-120 days is an estimate. The female needs the same temperatures and the same basking spot as usual and plenty of food and calcium. Keep her alone in the enclosure as the birth approaches.

REARING THE YOUNG

The juveniles are just under 3 cm from snout to vent and fend for themselves from birth. Give them a small, densely planted enclosure with the same temperatures, UVB and basking spot as the adults. Feed daily with small insects, dusted with calcium. Separate the males when they develop colour.

Health and common mistakes

Wild-caught animals often have mites and intestinal parasites, so new animals should be quarantined and have their droppings examined. Typical problems are:

- Emaciation in newly bought animals. Even animals that eat well on arrival can begin to lose weight, and once the emaciation has started, it is hard to stop.
- Metabolic bone disease from too little UVB and calcium.
- Respiratory infection and mould in stagnant, wet air.
- Dehydration from air that is too dry and too little drinking water.
- Overheating if the enclosure is warm around the clock.

- Loss of the tail if the animal is held by the tail.

A healthy animal is agile, has clear eyes and a plump tail. Lifespan is not reliably documented but is short, up to about 5 years. An animal that loses weight, does not eat or breathes with its mouth open must see a vet with reptile experience.

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.