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IGUANAS

Western fence lizard

Sceloporus occidentalis

Sceloporus occidentalis is a small, fast, rough-scaled lizard from the western USA that sits on rocks, trunks and fences in full sun. The male has blue patches on the belly and throat, which he shows off with push-ups. The species reaches about 21 cm, is diurnal and feeds on insects. It needs a strong basking spot, UVB, a spacious enclosure and a tight-fitting lid.

Family: Phrynosomatidae Former name: *Sceloporus longipes; Sceloporus smaragdinus*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**14-23 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**4-5 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal, rock-dwelling and terrestrial**
Habitat	**Rocky terrain and temperate woodland and meadow**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**80 × 40 × 40 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**27-28 °C**
Basking spot	**38-42 °C**
Temperature, night	**18-24 °C**
Humidity	**30-50%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Essential** Ferguson zone 3
Winter rest	**8-12 °C** 8-12 weeks
Diet	**Insects**
Kept	**Singly, in pairs or one male with several females**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Sexually mature	**12-24 months**
Clutch size	**3-17 eggs**
Clutches per year	**1-3**
Incubation	**55-65 days** at 27-30 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Sceloporus occidentalis is a small, strongly built lizard with large, overlapping scales that are keeled and end in a small point. This gives the skin a rough surface. From snout to vent an adult measures 6-9 cm, and including the tail the lizard is about 21 cm. Males can reach almost 10 cm from snout to vent.

The colour is brown, grey or black with dark spots. Some animals have pale lines along the back, and the back of the legs is yellow to orange. The lizard is darkest when it is cold and lightens when it is warm. The male has blue, black-edged patches on the sides of the belly and two blue areas on the throat, often joined by a pale band. Some males have blue-green scales on the back and tail. The female has faint blue patches or none and dark crossbands or half-moons on the back. The young have little or no blue colour. The males also have a swollen tail base and large pores on the underside of the thighs.

The species is divided into five subspecies, which differ in appearance and range and interbreed where their ranges meet. Animals offered as *S. occidentalis* can therefore look different. The subspecies make no difference to care.

S. occidentalis is common and more visible than most other lizards in its range. It is fast, does not become tame, and the tail easily comes off if the animal is grabbed. Lifespan is not documented; 4-5 years is borrowed from *Sceloporus undulatus*.

Distribution and habitat

Sceloporus occidentalis lives in the western part of North America. In the USA it is found in Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, western Utah and southern Idaho. To the south the range extends into the northern part of Baja California in Mexico and to the island of Isla de Cedros.

The species is found from sea level to about 3,300 m above sea level. It avoids the harshest deserts and is often found near water. A single population outside the range in British Columbia in Canada may be the result of introduction, but may also be natural. It is not shown on the map.

> **Native range:** United States and Mexico.

HABITAT

The species is found in very varied open, sunny habitats: grassland, scrub, open woodland, mountain forest, fields and the edges of roads and paths. It avoids dense forest and desert. It sits on rocks, fallen trees, trunks, woodpiles, fences and house walls and seeks shelter in crevices, holes and under bark and stones.

The lizard is diurnal and basks a great deal. It is active when it is warm and retreats into hiding in both extreme heat and cold. The males have a territory with high lookouts, which they defend with push-ups and head bobs and ultimately by fighting.

Its food is small arthropods, especially insects. It spends the winter hibernating, and the length depends on the climate. In mild regions the animals are active for most of the year.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Little is known about the care of *Sceloporus occidentalis* specifically, so care is based on the requirements that the small, sun-loving species in the genus share. The enclosure sizes are borrowed from *Sceloporus undulatus*, which has the same size and way of life.

An adult needs an enclosure of at least 80 × 40 × 40 cm (length × width × height). A pair or a male with two females needs at least 100 × 50 × 50 cm. Bigger is better, because the species is fast and uses the whole enclosure. The lid must be tight-fitting, of mesh or grille, because the species jumps well.

Use a mixture of sand and soil 5-10 cm deep as the substrate, so that the lizard can dig a little and the female can lay eggs. Place bark, cork, sloping branches and flat stones at different heights as basking spots and hides. The branches must be at least twice as thick as the animal's body. The stones must sit stably directly on the base, because the lizards retreat into crevices between them. Place the highest basking spot directly under the heat lamp, and make hides in both the warm and the cool end. The enclosure becomes heavy with substrate and stones, so it must stand on a solid base.

Read more: Heat and temperature

TEMPERATURE

By day the temperature should be 27-28 °C. Directly under a heat lamp there should be a basking spot of 38-42 °C, measured on the surface with an infrared thermometer. The rest of the enclosure should be cooler, so that the lizard can choose where to lie. At night the lamp is switched off, and the temperature falls to 18-24 °C. No extra heat is needed if the room stays at least 18 °C.

Both too little and too much heat are harmful. If it is too cold, the lizard becomes sluggish and eats poorly. If the whole enclosure is too hot, it digs itself in and does not thrive. Use a thermostat for the lamp and two thermometers, one in the warm and one in the cool end.

Animals from northern and high-altitude regions hibernate naturally. This can be omitted if light and heat are kept up all year, but it is the surest route to regular offspring. See the section on mating.

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Air humidity should be moderate, about 30-50 %. The species lives in open, sunlit areas and does not tolerate persistent steamy humidity, but the substrate must not be bone dry either. The figure is an estimate based on the habitat.

Mist lightly once a day on stones and plants so that droplets form for the lizards to lick, and let it dry off during the day. Also provide a low, stable bowl of fresh water, changed daily. Ensure good ventilation so that the air does not stand still.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

Sceloporus occidentalis is diurnal and sun-loving and needs strong light and UVB all year round. Use a UVB tube (Ferguson zone 3) or a combined UVB metal halide lamp over the basking spot. The basking spot should be no more than 30 cm from the UVB source, because UVB light works only at short range. Replace the light source according to the manufacturer's instructions.

There must always be a cooler and shadier place. Keep the light on for at least 12 hours a day, following the season, with about 14 hours in summer and 10 hours in winter, controlled by a timer. At night it must be dark.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Sceloporus occidentalis is an insectivore. In the wild it eats crickets, spiders, ticks, scorpions, ants and beetles and now and then takes a smaller lizard. In a terrarium, use crickets, small cockroaches, grasshoppers, mealworms, silkworms and waxworms. Variety matters: offer several different species of insect, and do not let mealworms make up the bulk. Insects caught with a net on a pesticide-free meadow are a good supplement in summer.

The feeder insects must be soft and no more than a third of the width of the lizard's jaws. Feed adults every other day with as much as they eat within a few minutes. Feed subadults every day. Do not give more than the animal eats, because the species easily becomes too fat in a terrarium.

Give the feeder insects nutritious food for a couple of days before they are fed. Dust them with calcium without D3 at most feedings and with calcium with D3 every ten to fourteen days for adults and every week for subadults.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Sceloporus occidentalis is wary, fast and territorial. The males display with push-ups, head bobs and an inflated body. The species does not become tame and is not suited to handling. It is easily stressed and sheds its tail if grabbed. Never grab the tail. Brief handling for health checks and moving is fine. Wild-caught animals need several weeks of peace to settle in.

The species can be kept singly, in pairs or as a male with two females in a large enclosure with many visual barriers. Two males are never kept together, not even in a large enclosure, and females can also quarrel. If the animals chase each other, bite, or one animal hides all the time, they must be separated. Open the lid carefully, because the lizards jump well.

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

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The male has blue, black-edged patches on the sides of the belly and two blue areas on the throat, a swollen tail base and large pores on the underside of the thighs. The female has faint blue patches or none and dark crossbands or half-moons on the back. The signs are clearest in the breeding season. The species first breeds in spring of its second year. Females must be fully grown and in good condition before they are used for breeding.

MATING

In the wild mating takes place in spring, from late April to early June. Use hibernation to get the animals to breed regularly, and give it only to healthy, well-nourished animals: switch off light and heat and keep them at 8-12 °C in complete darkness and 60-70 % humidity, without anything becoming wet, for eight to twelve weeks. Provide water, but no food during this

period. The figures apply to the genus in general. After the rest, increase light and heat gradually over a couple of weeks.

The male is introduced to the female, or they live together in a large enclosure. He shows his blue patches, nods and pursues her. The female cares for neither eggs nor young. Give the female extra insects and calcium during the laying period.

Read more: Brumation and the seasons

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays the eggs two to four weeks after mating, normally from June to July. She lays one to three clutches a year of 3-17 eggs, most often about 8. She digs a small pit in loose, damp soil, often at night, and lays the eggs there. Place a laying box with a damp mixture of sand and soil, at least 10 cm deep, in the enclosure. A female without a suitable place may retain the eggs. If she digs without laying, or is clearly carrying eggs for several weeks, she must see a vet.

INCUBATION

The eggs are white and leathery and measure about 8 × 14 mm. Move them carefully to a box with slightly damp vermiculite or perlite without turning them. The incubation temperature is not documented for the species; 27-30 °C is borrowed from *Sceloporus undulatus*. The eggs hatch after about 60 days. Keep the humidity even, so that the eggs neither dry out nor take up too much water.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

Newly hatched young measure 2-3 cm from snout to vent, and including the tail they are twice as long. Keep them separately or in small groups of the same size in a smaller enclosure with the same temperature, UVB and furnishings as the adults. Offer small insects daily, such as springtails, fruit flies, newly hatched crickets and small mealworms, dusted with calcium and D3 every week. Mist daily, and separate the animals if there is fighting.

Health and common mistakes

Sceloporus occidentalis is hardy when temperature, light and food are right. The typical problems are:

- Calcium deficiency and metabolic bone disease from too little UVB and calcium. This causes soft jaws, bent legs and tremors.
- Stunted growth and emaciation from temperatures that are too low or a one-sided diet, especially in newly imported animals.
- Obesity from too much food and too little exercise.
- Intestinal worms and mites, especially in wild-caught animals. Have a faecal sample examined, and check the skin.
- Stress and injuries from too few hides, enclosures that are too small or several males together, with bites and shed tails.
- Egg-laying problems if the female does not have a suitable laying place.
- Shedding problems from air that is too dry, where scales remain on the toes and tail.

A healthy animal is alert, has clear eyes, a plump tail and a firm grip. Seek a vet with experience in reptiles if the lizard loses weight, does not eat, is limp or has swellings in the jaw.

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.