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IGUANAS

Rose-bellied Lizard

Sceloporus variabilis

Sceloporus variabilis is a small, rough-scaled lizard from Mexico and Central America. The male has a pink patch with a dark blue border on each side of the belly, while the female is brownish and subdued. The species is diurnal, feeds on insects and lays eggs several times a year. It needs a warm enclosure with sun, UVB and plenty of hiding places, and it is fast and shy.

Family: Phrynosomatidae

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**10-15 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**4-5 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial**
Habitat	**Savanna, dry forest and rainforest**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**80 × 40 × 40 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**27-30 °C**
Basking spot	**38-42 °C**
Temperature, night	**18-22 °C**
Humidity	**40-60%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Essential** Ferguson zone 3
Diet	**Insects**
Kept	**Singly, in pairs or one male with several females**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Clutch size	**2-7 eggs**
Clutches per year	**3-4**
Incubation	**55-70 days** at 27-30 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Sceloporus variabilis is a small, sturdily built lizard with pointed, keeled scales on the back and tail, so it feels rough to the touch. The back is brown or olive-brown with two rows of dark brown spots and a pale yellowish stripe along each side of the back. The belly is dirty white or yellowish. On each side of the belly the male has a large pink patch with a dark blue border and a black mark in the armpit. The female lacks the coloured belly patches and is more subdued. The species name refers to the great difference in colour between the sexes.

The species is among the smallest in the genus. Males grow to around 15 cm in total length including the tail, and females are slightly smaller. The body measures roughly 5-7 cm from snout to vent. Animals from different regions do not all look alike: size, colour and breeding rhythm vary between populations.

The taxonomy is not entirely settled. The northern form *S. v. marmoratus* and the southern *S. v. olloporus* are traditionally regarded as subspecies. Genetic studies show that they are separate species, but they are still often listed under *Sceloporus variabilis*. Animals in the trade may therefore belong to one of these forms.

Sceloporus variabilis is an animal to watch, not to handle. It is fast and shy and bolts for the nearest hiding place. The species is rare in captivity.

Distribution and habitat

Sceloporus variabilis lives in Mexico from southern Tamaulipas along the Atlantic coast to central Veracruz, and inland to eastern Querétaro, Hidalgo and Puebla. Further south it occurs through eastern Oaxaca and Chiapas, and in Central America through Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua to north-western Costa Rica. The species occurs from sea level to about 2,500 m. The type locality is restricted to Veracruz.

The northern form, *S. v. marmoratus*, reaches from north-eastern Mexico into southern Texas. It is often regarded as a separate species and is not included on the map.

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

HABITAT

Sceloporus variabilis lives in many kinds of landscape: sandy beaches, grassland, scrub, dry forest, lowland evergreen tropical forest and montane cloud forest. It is found on the ground, on rocks, trunks and fence posts, wherever there is sun and cover. It is diurnal and active all year round in the warmer regions, and feeds on arthropods such as insects and spiders.

The climate varies greatly with altitude: from warm, humid coastal lowland with around 1,500 mm of rain a year to cooler, drier mountain regions with a mean temperature of about 15 °C. Females lay eggs, and in several populations breeding takes place almost all year.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Little is known about keeping *Sceloporus variabilis*. The figures for enclosure, temperature, humidity, incubation and lifespan are borrowed from *Sceloporus undulatus*, which is similar in size and way of life and far better known in captivity.

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. Larger is better, because the species is fast and uses the whole floor area, and two males must never be housed together. The lid must fit tightly and be made of mesh or grille, because the genus jumps well and is quickly out.

The substrate is a mixture of sand and soil 5-10 cm deep, so the animal can dig a little and the female can lay her eggs. Provide flat stones, cork and sloping branches at different heights for basking and hiding. The stones must sit firmly directly on the floor of the enclosure. Provide hides at both the warm and the cool end.

The enclosure should stand in a quiet spot, because the animal is shy. Remove droppings regularly and replace the substrate when it is soiled.

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

TEMPERATURE

During the day the ambient temperature should be 27-30 °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 the lizard can choose where to lie. Use a thermostat for the lamp and two thermometers, one at the warm and one at the cool end.

At night the lamp is switched off and the temperature can fall to 18-22 °C. No extra heat is needed if the room stays at 18 °C or above. If it is too cold, the animal becomes sluggish and eats poorly. If the whole enclosure is too warm, it digs in and does not thrive. The species comes from warm regions and does not need a winter rest.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be moderate, around 40-60 %. The species lives in both dry and humid regions, but always on sunlit spots, and the enclosure must not be permanently steamy. The substrate must not be bone dry either. Mist lightly once a day on a wall and on rocks, so that droplets form for the lizard to lick, and let it dry out during the day.

Also provide a shallow, stable bowl of fresh water, changed daily. Ensure good ventilation so the air does not stagnate. The substrate must not be wet.

LIGHTING AND UVB

Sceloporus variabilis is diurnal and basks in full sun, so it needs strong light and UVB all year round. Use a UVB tube for sun-loving species (Ferguson zone 3) or a combined UVB metal halide lamp above the basking spot. The basking spot should be 20-30 cm from the UVB source, and the lamp should be replaced according to the manufacturer's instructions. UVB does not pass through glass or plastic.

Keep the light on for about 12 hours a day, controlled by a timer, and switched off completely at night. There must always be a cooler, shadier area.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Sceloporus variabilis eats insects. Offer a varied diet of live insects such as small crickets, small cockroaches, grasshoppers, silkworms and mealworms. Offer at least three or four kinds, and do not let mealworms make up the bulk. Feeder insects must not be wider than the distance between the lizard's eyes. Feed them well for a couple of days before offering them.

Adults are fed every other day with as much as they eat in a few minutes. Juveniles are fed every day. Do not give more than the animal eats, because the species easily becomes overweight in captivity.

Dust the food with calcium with D3 every 10-14 days for adults, and once a week for juveniles and for females during the egg-laying season. At other feeds, use plain calcium without D3.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Sceloporus variabilis is fast, watchful and territorial. Males display with push-ups and head-bobbing and defend their space against other males. The species does not become tame and is not suited to handling. It can shed its tail if grasped, so never take hold of the tail. Brief handling for health checks and moving is fine.

A single animal, a pair or a male with two females can be kept together in a large enclosure with many visual barriers. Two males are never kept together, and females can also squabble. If the animals chase each other, or one hides all the time, they must be separated. Open the lid carefully, because the lizards jump well. New animals need to be left in peace for the first few weeks.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The sexes can be told apart by colour: the male has pink belly patches with a dark blue border and a black mark in the armpit, which the female lacks. The male is also larger and has a thicker tail base. The animals are sexually mature at a snout-to-vent length of around 4-6 cm, depending on the population. Age at sexual maturity is not documented.

MATING

In the warm regions the species breeds almost all year. In the enclosure, a clear seasonal rhythm with long days in summer and shorter ones in winter gives the best results. The male is introduced to the female, or they live together in a large enclosure. He displays with push-ups and pursues her. After mating the sexes have nothing to do with each other. Give the female extra insects and calcium throughout the season, and remove the male if he pursues her relentlessly.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays 2-7 eggs per clutch, 3-4 on average, and she can lay 3-4 clutches in the course of a year. Place a laying box with a moist sand-and-soil mixture, at least 10 cm deep, in the enclosure, and keep the substrate evenly moist but not wet. A female without a suitable site may retain her eggs. If she digs without laying, or is clearly gravid for several weeks, she must see a vet.

INCUBATION

The eggs are carefully removed and placed in moist vermiculite in an egg tray at 27-30 °C. Do not turn the eggs, and keep the vermiculite moist but not wet. The eggs hatch after about 55-70 days.

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are small and fend for themselves from hatching. House them individually 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 and newly hatched crickets, dusted with calcium and D3 every week. Mist daily, and separate the animals if there is fighting.

Health and common mistakes

New *Sceloporus variabilis* must be quarantined for at least three months and have their faeces tested for parasites. Typical problems are:

- Calcium deficiency and brittle bones (metabolic bone disease) from too little UVB and calcium. This causes soft jaws, bent legs and tremors.
- Mites and intestinal worms, especially in wild-caught animals.
- Stunted growth and emaciation from too low a temperature or a one-sided diet.
- Dehydration and shedding problems from too little drinking water.
- Burns from heat lamps that sit too low or lack a guard.
- Stress and refusal of food in newly caught animals. Quiet and plenty of hiding places help.
- Loss of the tail if the animal is held by the tail.

A healthy animal is quick, has bright eyes, a plump tail and no mites in the skin folds. The species lives 4-5 years in captivity. An animal that loses weight, does not eat or breathes with its mouth open must see a vet experienced with reptiles.

Read more: Common diseases and signs of illness Read more: Buying animals: captive-bred, wild-caught and transport

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.