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LACERTIDS

Fringe-fingered Lizard

Acanthodactylus erythrurus

Acanthodactylus erythrurus is a fast, slender lizard from Iberia and north-western Africa with long, fringed toes, brown and grey markings and a reddish tail in juveniles and in females during the breeding season. It reaches 18-23 cm, feeds on insects and needs a deep sand substrate, strong sunlight and high heat.

Family: Lacertidae

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**18-23 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**5-8 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial and burrowing**
Habitat	**Semi-desert and temperate woodland and meadow**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**100 × 50 × 40 cm** L × W × H for 2 adults
Temperature, day	**25-35 °C**
Basking spot	**40-45 °C**
Temperature, night	**15-22 °C**
Humidity	**30-50%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Recommended** Ferguson zone 3
Winter rest	**10-15 °C** 8-12 weeks
Diet	**Insects**
Kept	**In pairs**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Sexually mature	**10-18 months**
Clutch size	**1-8 eggs**
Clutches per year	**1-2**
Incubation	**35-60 days** at 25-30 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Acanthodactylus erythrurus is a medium-sized, fast lizard with a pointed snout, a slightly thick tail base and long toes with fringed scale edges that give grip on loose sand. The species reaches 18-23 cm in total, and the tail makes up about two thirds of the length. The snout-vent length is up to 8 cm. The base colour is brown to grey with whitish, grey-brown or black markings, and juveniles are more contrasting than adults. In juveniles and subadults the underside of the tail is often bright red or orange; this gradually fades with age, but females regain a red tail and red thighs during the breeding season, and males develop more distinct yellow eye spots.

The animal is very fast, runs low to the ground and can shed its tail when in danger. The tail regrows, but without new vertebrae. The taxonomy is not settled: the Moroccan *Acanthodactylus lineomaculatus* has been merged into the species, and a few mountain populations in Spain have been split off as separate species (*Acanthodactylus lacrymae* and *Acanthodactylus*

montanus), so animals in the trade may belong to different forms. Lifespan in captivity is not documented; 5-8 years is an estimate based on other small lizards.

Males are territorial and can fight each other. The animal is shy and is one to watch, not to handle.

Distribution and habitat

Acanthodactylus erythrurus lives in southern and central Spain and in Portugal, on Gibraltar and in North Africa: north-western Morocco and northern Algeria. In Spain it is found especially along the coast and in the large valleys of the interior; to the north it follows the Mediterranean coast to the area around Girona. Records from outside this range are not confirmed.

> **Native range:** Spain, Portugal, Gibraltar, Morocco and Algeria.

HABITAT

Acanthodactylus erythrurus lives in open, warm and dry places with sparse vegetation: coastal dunes, sandy plains with low scrub, stony slopes and cork oak woodland. The species requires loose soil to dig in and low scrub for cover. It stays on the ground, buries itself in the sand and takes shelter under stones and under the bark of cork oaks.

The animals are diurnal and bask on the ground in alternating sun and shade. On the warm coast in the south and east they are active almost all year, whereas in the cooler parts of the range the animals retreat in autumn and winter into self-dug, sun-facing burrows and are inactive for a few months, typically from November to February. Mating takes place from March to June, and females lay eggs from June to August, often twice in warm regions.

The diet is mainly ants and other insects, spiders and other small arthropods; a little plant matter, for example flower petals, is also taken.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Little is known about the care of *Acanthodactylus erythrurus*. The species lives on warm, loose sand and gravel with sparse scrub in a Mediterranean climate with hot, dry summers and cool winters, and its care is based on that and on its relative *Acanthodactylus scutellatus*, which is kept in the same way. A pair needs an enclosure of at least 100 × 50 × 40 cm (length × width × height). These are fast, running animals, so floor area is what matters, and a low enclosure is enough.

The substrate is sand in a layer of 8-10 cm, so that the animal can bury itself. Lay flat stones, cork bark and dry branches on the sand as basking spots and hides. Artificial caves are rarely used; the animals prefer to bury themselves in the sand. Planting is not necessary, but drought-tolerant plants and grass tufts provide shelter.

Keep only one pair in an enclosure. Males fight, and several males cannot be kept together. The lid must be tight, because the animals are fast. For egg-laying there must be a place with slightly damp sand where the female can dig; a dish with 10 cm of damp sand is easy to search when the eggs are to be removed.

TEMPERATURE

Acanthodactylus erythrurus is very fond of heat: active adults in the wild maintain a body temperature of 32-38 °C. By day the enclosure should be 25-35 °C with a basking spot that reaches a surface temperature of 40-45 °C under a spotlight, and at night 15-22 °C.

In the cooler parts of the range the animals brumate from about November to February, whereas on the warm coast they are active almost all year. A cool rest at 10-15 °C for 8-12 weeks with the heat lamps switched off and a short day suits this. Only healthy, well-fed animals may be brumated, and feeding is stopped a couple of weeks beforehand so that the gut is empty. See also the theme page on brumation.

Read more: Heat and temperature Read more: Brumation and the seasons

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be 30-50 %, as in the dry, open habitat. The sand should be dry, and only the sand in the laying box is kept damp, while the rest of the enclosure is kept well ventilated.

The animals drink from a shallow water bowl and lick droplets from stones when the enclosure is lightly misted now and then. Change the water every day.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

Acanthodactylus erythrurus is diurnal and basks a great deal, so the enclosure needs strong light and UVB. Use a T5 tube for Ferguson zone 3 over the basking spot, so that the animal receives a UV index of 3-5 at head level; the distance is determined with a UV meter. Zone 3 suits an animal that basks openly on the ground. Glass blocks UVB, so the tube must be inside the enclosure or in an open part of the lid.

Day length follows the season: 12-14 hours in summer and shorter in the winter half of the year. The spotlight is on for 5-7 hours in the middle of the day.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Acanthodactylus erythrurus eats insects and other small arthropods, in the wild especially ants. Offer a varied diet: small crickets, grasshoppers, mealworms, cockroaches, flies, silkworms and spiders, in sizes the animal can swallow whole. Plant matter is not necessary. Dust the food with calcium, and give a vitamin supplement with D3 regularly, unless the animal receives UVB.

Juveniles are fed daily with small crickets and other small insects. Adults are fed every other day in the active season, as much as they eat in a few minutes. Feeding is reduced before brumation, and the animal should be in good condition, but not fat.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Acanthodactylus erythrurus is fast, wary and shy. It buries itself in the sand when in danger and is hard to catch. Avoid grabbing the animal; the tail is shed under stress.

Males are territorial and fight over space. The pair should have plenty of room and many hiding places, so that a subordinate female can retreat. The species should not be kept with other species. Move the animal as seldom as possible.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The male has a thicker tail base, stronger yellow eye spots and a broader head, and the female develops red thighs and tail during the breeding season. The animals become sexually mature after 10-18 months, that is, in their first or second summer.

MATING

Mating takes place in spring, from March to June. Males are most active and most strongly coloured during the breeding season; watch the animals during the first few days, and separate them if the female is injured.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays eggs from June to August. In her first year she usually lays one clutch, later often two, especially in warm regions. A clutch contains 1-8 eggs, on average 4-5. Provide a dish of slightly damp sand as a laying site, and check it daily during the period.

INCUBATION

The eggs are removed as soon as they are laid and placed, without being turned, in slightly damp sand or vermiculite. The incubation period is not documented for the species; at 25-30 °C the eggs of other small lizards such as *Podarcis muralis* and *Lacerta agilis* hatch after 35-60 days.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

The young have bright red tails, are diurnal and very fast, and measure about 3 cm from snout to vent. They should be fed daily with small insects dusted with calcium, and given strong light and UVB. They are best kept in small groups of equal size, or individually if they bite each other.

Health and common mistakes

Most problems are caused by too little heat, too little UVB, a one-sided diet and too little space. The typical ones are:

- Metabolic bone disease from too little UVB and calcium. Provide UVB, and dust the food.
- Mites and internal parasites in new animals. New animals are quarantined, and a faecal sample is taken before any brumation.
- Wounds from fights or mating. Separate the animals if there are wounds.
- Loss of the tail. It regrows, but without new vertebrae.
- Respiratory problems from sand that is too damp or too little heat.
- Problems during brumation in thin or sick animals. If the animal is sick or underweight, it should not be brumated.

A healthy animal has clear eyes, a plump tail, smooth skin and a good appetite. See a vet with experience in reptiles if the animal does not eat, loses weight or breathes with its mouth open.

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.