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LACERTIDS

Amazon Racerunner

Ameiva ameiva

Ameiva ameiva is a large, fast, diurnal teiid from South America. The males are green with a blue belly and grow to 50 cm. The species is omnivorous, likes to dig and needs a large, warm, sunny enclosure with a deep substrate and strong light and UVB. It is shy and nervous and is best suited to keepers with some experience.

Family: Teiidae

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**40-50 cm** total length incl. tail
Weight	**60-70 g**
Lifespan	**3-5 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial and burrowing**
Habitat	**Savanna, dry forest and rainforest**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**150 × 70 × 60 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**25-30 °C**
Basking spot	**40-45 °C**
Temperature, night	**20-24 °C**
Humidity	**50-70%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Essential** Ferguson zone 3
Diet	**Insects, fruit, vertebrates and worms/snails**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Clutch size	**3-11 eggs**
Clutches per year	**1-3**
Incubation	**140-160 days** at 27-30 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Ameiva ameiva is a slender, fast lizard with a pointed snout, a long tail and powerful hind legs. Adults grow to 40-50 cm in total, of which the tail makes up more than half. The body is small in proportion to the length: typically 12-13 cm from snout to vent, and the largest males reach about 18 cm. An adult weighs about 60-70 g.

The colour is olive-brown on the forebody and greener towards the rear, with black spots and white eyespots. The pale bands along the sides are yellow in adults and white in young animals, and the groin is sky blue. The males are larger and a stronger green than the females, have heavier jowls and often a turquoise belly, while the females' belly is white. The amount of green varies from animal to animal.

The species is shy, wary and nervous and has to settle into its surroundings before it relaxes. The eyesight is sharp, and the reactions are almost instantaneous. Some animals are decidedly bitey. The tail is shed under stress and only partly regrows. The species is closely related to the tegus but is smaller.

Some forms that were formerly regarded as colour variants of the species are now regarded as species in their own right (for example *Ameiva praesignis*). Ask the seller about the identification of the species when buying.

Distribution and habitat

Ameiva ameiva has one of the largest ranges of any South American lizard. The species occurs from Colombia and Venezuela through Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana to most of Brazil, and westwards in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. To the south it reaches Paraguay and northern Argentina. The populations on Trinidad, Tobago and Grenada are assigned to this species by some authors and to *Ameiva atrigularis* by others.

An introduced population exists in Florida. It is not counted here. The division into subspecies is disputed, and several of them are now regarded as separate species.

> **Native range:** Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Argentina, Paraguay and Trinidad & Tobago.

HABITAT

Ameiva ameiva lives in open, light terrain: forest edges, savannah, scrub and farmland, in Brazil among other places in the cerrado and caatinga. It seems to prefer disturbed rainforest where trees have been felled, and clearings on the forest floor. The animal rests in the leaf litter and under rotting logs and stones and, when threatened, quickly retreats down a dug tunnel.

The species is diurnal and can be seen basking in the middle of the day, when it is hottest. It hunts actively and scratches insects out of the ground. The diet is mixed: insects such as grasshoppers, butterflies, cockroaches, beetles and termites, and also frogs, small lizards (including its own kind), spiders, snails and plant matter.

The female lays several clutches of 3-11 eggs. Clutch size increases with the female's size. Where there is a distinct dry season, the species breeds only in the rainy season, otherwise all year round. In the wild the animals become sexually mature after about eight months, at about 10 cm from snout to vent.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Ameiva ameiva is an active digging and running lizard that needs far more space than its body size suggests. One animal needs an enclosure of at least 150 × 70 × 60 cm (length × width × height). Bigger is better, and floor area matters more than height. There is no reliable figure for how many animals can be kept together. Keep the animals singly; a pair needs much more space and many hiding places, and the species can be aggressive towards its own kind.

The substrate must be deep enough for the animal to dig tunnels: 15-20 cm of a mixture of soil and sand, preferably with a dry and a slightly damp part. Add flat stones, pieces of bark and roots as hiding places and basking spots, and make a damp hide box at one end. Low branches and slabs of bark are used as basking spots. The enclosure needs a tight lid, because the animal is fast and jumps.

TEMPERATURE

By day the enclosure should be 25-30 °C. Under a strong spotlight a flat stone or a dry patch of soil should have a surface temperature of 40-45 °C so that the animal can warm up, and the enclosure should have a cooler end of about 24 °C. At night the temperature falls to 20-24 °C and must not drop below 20 °C. Active animals in the wild have a body temperature of about 37 °C. The species does not hibernate.

Measure the surface temperature of the basking spot with an IR thermometer and the air temperature at the cool end. Keep a clear gradient so that the animal can choose for itself.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

The humidity is 50-70 %. The figure is derived from the habitat, because the husbandry literature gives no precise values. Keep part of the substrate dry and part slightly damp, not wet. Forest animals benefit from a damp hide box. The animals drink from a shallow dish of fresh water, changed daily, and like to bathe. Light misting a couple of times a week is an advantage.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

Ameiva ameiva is a diurnal sun-worshipper, so the enclosure needs strong light and UVB. Use a T5 tube for Ferguson zone 3 above the basking spot and a spotlight for the heat. Glass blocks UVB, so the tube must be inside the enclosure or in an open part of the lid. The distance is determined with a UV meter. The day length is 12 hours all year. Replace the UVB tube according to the manufacturer's instructions. Outdoors in full sun in warm weather does the animal good, but only in a secure, predator-proof area.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Ameiva ameiva is omnivorous, but the diet consists mostly of animal food. Offer a wide range of insects: crickets, grasshoppers, cockroaches, mealworms, silkworms and earthworms, preferably gut-loaded. Occasionally snails, newborn mice and a little fruit such as berries, melon and banana can be given. Dust the food with calcium and a multivitamin supplement, and do not give too much fruit.

Young animals are fed daily, adults every second or third day with as much as the animal eats in a few minutes. The animal hunts actively, so scatter the insects so that it has to search for them. That is the best way to keep it busy.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Ameiva ameiva is fast, wary and nervous and flees at the slightest disturbance. For the first few weeks the animal needs peace and many hiding places before it begins to show itself. Very well settled animals can become confident but are seldom tame enough to handle. Avoid grabbing the animal, and never take it by the tail. If it has to be lifted, support the rear body and thighs with one hand and the chest with the other.

The males are territorial and quick to become aggressive. Attacked animals get bite wounds and lose the tail. Bitey animals should not be forced to get used to handling. The species should not be kept with other species.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The males are larger than the females and have heavier jowls, a stronger green colour and often a turquoise belly; the females' belly is white. In the wild the animals become sexually mature at about 10 cm from snout to vent, after about eight months. The age at sexual maturity in captivity is not documented. Lifespan is poorly known: wild animals have been found up to almost 5 years old.

MATING

The mating biology is poorly known. Mating coincides with the maturing of the eggs, and the female can probably store sperm, so she can lay several clutches in the same season. The animals must be in good condition before they are put together, and the pair must have many hiding places and be watched closely so that a subordinate female is not injured.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays 3-11 eggs in a clutch, and in the wild a single animal can lay up to three clutches in a season. Before she lays, she often stays in her tunnel. Provide a deep, slightly damp laying site of soil and sand where she can dig. Captive breeding has hardly been described.

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

INCUBATION

The eggs are removed and placed in an incubation medium without being turned. The incubation period in the wild is about five months, and they typically hatch at the start of the rainy season. The incubation period in an incubator is not documented. The 140-160 days in the box are based on the incubation period in the wild, and 27-30 °C is an estimate based on the climate of the habitat.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are striped, with white pale bands, and grow quickly. The males grow faster than the females. Keep them singly or in small groups of animals of equal size with many hiding places, and feed them daily on small insects dusted with calcium. Provide UVB and heat as for adults.

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 or sunlight, and dust the food.
- Obesity from too much food and too little exercise. Keep the animal active, and limit fruit and fatty prey.
- Mites and internal parasites in new animals. Quarantine new animals and check them with a faecal sample.
- Stress in an enclosure that is too small or too open. The animal runs into the glass and injures its snout; provide cover and mask the back wall.
- Loss of the tail. It does not regrow to full length.

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

Read more: Quarantine and hygiene 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.