herpy

LACERTIDS

Gold Tegu

Tupinambis teguixin

Tupinambis teguixin is a large, powerful, diurnal tegu from the Amazon and the Guiana Shield, black with golden to yellowish bands. It reaches 60-120 cm, eats mostly animal food and is often defensive and hard to tame. It needs a very large, warm and humid enclosure, UVB and an experienced keeper who can handle a strong animal for 10-15 years.

Family: Teiidae Former name: *Tupinambis nigropunctatus*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**60-120 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**10-15 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial and burrowing**
Habitat	**Savanna, rainforest and wetland**
Difficulty	**Experienced**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**180 × 90 × 90 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**24-35 °C**
Basking spot	**40-55 °C**
Temperature, night	**20-24 °C**
Humidity	**70-85%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Essential** Ferguson zone 3
Diet	**Insects, fruit, vertebrates and worms/snails**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Clutch size	**4-32 eggs**
Incubation	**150-180 days** at 28-32 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Appendix II**
EU annex	**Annex B**
IUCN	**Least Concern (LC)**

About the species

Tupinambis teguixin is a heavy, powerfully built tegu with smooth, glossy scales, strong legs, long claws, a triangular head and a round tail that is longer than the body. The body is black with golden to pale yellow crossbands and spots, and the hind legs have round spots. The male has a broader head and more distinct cheeks than the female.

Adults typically reach 60-100 cm and a few up to 120 cm, with up to 40-50 cm from snout to vent, and weigh up to 3-4 kg. The species is thus clearly smaller than *Salvator merianae*. The tail vertebrae have fracture planes, so the tail breaks off easily.

The name and the delimitation of the species have been confusing for more than 150 years. The name *T. teguixin* was long used for the species that is today called *Salvator merianae*, while this species went under the name *Tupinambis nigropunctatus*. In 2016 what had until then been called *T. teguixin* was split into four species: *T. teguixin* in the narrow sense, *Tupinambis cryptus* in Venezuela, on Trinidad and Tobago and in the Guiana region, *Tupinambis cuzcoensis* at the foot of the Andes and *Tupinambis zuliensis* in the Maracaibo basin. The species are hard to tell apart, and *T. cryptus* lives side by side with *T. teguixin* in parts of the Guiana region. Older literature, information from Argentina and many figures from Trinidad and Venezuela therefore belong to other species, and the identification of animals in the trade is seldom certain.

T. teguixin is more defensive than the southern tegus. Wild-caught animals are shy and hard to tame, and most animals in the trade are wild-caught. It is not a pet to be handled every day, but a large, strong and intelligent animal that requires an experienced keeper.

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

Distribution and habitat

Tupinambis teguixin in the narrow sense lives in the Amazon and on the Guiana Shield: from the coast in Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana across Roraima and Pará in Brazil south to Mato Grosso and Goiás and west into the Brazilian state of Amazonas. Tegu populations in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia have so far been counted as part of the species, but after the split in 2016 it is not settled which of them belong to *T. teguixin* and which to *Tupinambis cuzcoensis* or as yet undescribed species.

The populations in Venezuela and on Trinidad and Tobago are *Tupinambis cryptus*. The species does not occur in Panama or Uruguay, and in the narrow sense it is not known from Argentina; older records from there probably belong to *Salvator merianae*.

> **Native range:** Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia.

HABITAT

Tupinambis teguixin is found in many habitats: rainforest, forest edges, savanna, coastal areas and along watercourses. It is diurnal, actively searches for food on the ground and in the leaf litter, and digs its own burrows or uses those of other animals. It basks in the morning and maintains a body temperature of 32-35 °C while active. The animals live alone and are territorial, and the males fight over the females.

The climate is tropical with high heat and humidity all year and, depending on the region, a rainy season and a dry season. Brumation is not documented for the species. The closely related *Tupinambis cryptus* on the plains of Venezuela has a rest period in the dry season, which precedes mating.

The diet is anything that can be overpowered: snails, insects, ants and termites, small mammals, smaller lizards and snakes, birds and bird eggs, turtles and caimans, fruit and honey. The size of the prey follows the size of the animal. The female digs a cavity in a termite mound, often up in a tree, and lays the eggs there. The termites close the mound again, and the eggs lie warm and humid until the rain softens the mound and the young can get out.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation Read more: Brumation and the seasons

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Little is known about the husbandry of *Tupinambis teguixin* in the narrow sense, and captive breeding is rare. Almost all animals in the trade are wild-caught, and the husbandry is based on experience with animals sold under the name and with the better-known *Salvator merianae* and *Salvator rufescens*.

An adult needs an enclosure of at least 180 × 90 × 90 cm (length × width × height); larger is better. A young animal can live for a short period in a smaller enclosure but quickly outgrows it, so plan the large enclosure from the start. The enclosure is typically custom-built, with front opening and good ventilation. The doors must be lockable, because the animal is strong and clever.

The substrate must be deep, because the animal digs: at least 20 cm for adults and at least 10 cm for juveniles. Use a mixture of fertiliser-free garden soil and coconut fibre or cypress mulch, which holds moisture and is good for digging, ideally with a layer of leaf litter on top. Avoid pine and cedar shavings, which are harmful. Provide flat stones as a basking spot, hides at both ends and a large, solid hide that the animal can go right into. Replace the whole substrate every 3-4 months, and remove droppings daily.

A large, shallow water tub that the animal can lie in is part of the set-up, because the species likes to bathe. Keep the animal alone.

Read more: Heat and temperature

TEMPERATURE

The basking spot should have a surface temperature of 40-55 °C, measured with an infrared thermometer. The warm end of the enclosure is 32-35 °C and the cool end 24-29 °C. At night the lights and heat are switched off, and the temperature falls to 20-24 °C.

Use several halogen spotlights close together over the basking spot so that the whole body is warmed evenly, and shield them with a guard so that the animal cannot reach the bulbs. Ceramic heaters and red or blue bulbs are not suitable. Measure with digital thermometers, and check the basking spot with an infrared thermometer. The animal must always be able to move away from the heat.

The species is tropical and does not need brumation. Animals kept too cold digest poorly, lose their appetite and become susceptible to infections.

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be 70-85 %. That is higher than for most lizards and corresponds to a tropical forest. Keep the substrate moist but not wet, mist once or twice a day, or use a fogger. A layer of leaf litter on top of the substrate helps, and water poured directly into the substrate does too, as long as it does not become boggy.

The water tub must be large enough for the animal to lie in. Change the water often, and clean the tub when it is dirty; tegus drag substrate into the water and often leave droppings in it.

LIGHTING AND UVB

Tupinambis teguixin is diurnal and basks for several hours a day, so it needs strong light and UVB 12 hours a day. Tegus belong to Ferguson zone 3. Use a T5 HO tube of 10-12 % in a fixture with a reflector over the basking spot. With the tube inside the enclosure the distance to the basking spot is typically 43-46 cm, and through mesh 33-38 cm. Check with a UV meter if possible, and replace the tubes according to the manufacturer's instructions, typically every year.

A powerful LED or T5 fixture with daylight (about 6,500 K) gives a bright enclosure in addition to the heat lamps.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Tupinambis teguixin is omnivorous but lives mostly on animal food: about 90 % animal food and 10 % fruit and vegetables. Give a varied diet of insects (crickets, cockroaches, locusts, mealworms and other larvae), snails, whole prey such as thawed mice, rats, chicks and quail, eggs, fish and lean meat. Variety is more important than any single food; a diet of rodents alone causes obesity and deficiencies.

Juveniles up to 6 months are fed 5 times a week, 7-12 months 4 times, 1-2 years 3 times and adults 2 times a week. Watch the quantity, because the species easily becomes overweight. Dust insects and meat with calcium, and give a multivitamin regularly; whole prey needs no supplement. Never give live rodents, which can bite the animal.

Feeding with long tweezers gives good, calm contact and helps the animal to tell hand from food.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Tupinambis teguixin is strong, fast and defensive. Wild-caught animals are stressed and hard to tame, and they bite, lash with the tail and scratch if they feel threatened. A bite from an adult tegu can cause deep wounds. Animals bought as juveniles are easier to tame than adult wild-caught animals. It takes patience and calm daily contact, for example food from tweezers. Many animals bond with only one person.

Stay calm around the animal, approach from the side, and avoid sudden movements and grabbing from above. The animal hisses, puffs itself up and lashes with the tail when frightened. Never grab the tail. Give newly acquired animals a few weeks in peace.

Keep the animal alone; males are territorial and can seriously injure one another. Reptiles can carry *Salmonella*, so wash your hands thoroughly after any contact, and do not let small children touch the animal unsupervised. The species is an active hunter that needs space, digging opportunities and varied food.

Read more: Quarantine and hygiene

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The male has a broader head and more distinct cheeks than the female, and in adult males the difference is clear. In young animals appearance is not reliable, so have the sex determined by a vet if it is important. Age and size at sexual maturity are not documented for the species in the narrow sense.

MATING

Almost nothing is known about mating in captivity, and breeding is rare. In the closely related species the male follows a receptive female, guards her against other males, treads in place in front of her and nudges her with his snout. Mating itself is violent: the male bites onto the female's neck and winds his tail around hers. In *Tupinambis cryptus* in Venezuela and on Trinidad, mating and egg-laying take place in the early dry season. What triggers mating in captivity is not documented.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female lays the eggs in a termite mound, often up in a tree. The species in the group lay smaller clutches than *Salvator merianae*; clutches are 4-32 eggs, while *Tupinambis cryptus* can lay up to 50. The number of clutches a year is not documented. Give a female that is about to lay a deep, moist substrate or a large, closed laying box with moist soil that she can dig in. Without a suitable place she can retain the eggs, and this is life-threatening.

INCUBATION

In the wild the eggs lie in the termite mound until the first heavy rains come, and incubation therefore lasts 150-180 days. The incubation temperature in captivity is not documented; 28-32 °C is an estimate based on the tropical climate. Use a closed container with moist vermiculite or perlite and a small ventilation hole, and leave the eggs undisturbed. The eggs must not become wet.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

In the wild the young hatch in the rainy season and fend for themselves from the start. They measure about 9 cm from snout to vent and are shyer than adults. Keep them in an enclosure with a deep, moist substrate, many hides, UVB and high heat, and feed them small insects dusted with calcium. There is no detailed rearing guide for the species.

Health and common mistakes

Many problems are caused by mistakes in husbandry, especially too little heat, too little UVB and too one-sided a diet. In wild-caught animals, stress and parasites come on top.

- Obesity from too much fatty food and too little exercise. Weigh the animal regularly.
- Metabolic bone disease from too little UVB and calcium.
- Respiratory infections and mouth rot from too low a temperature and a wet substrate without warmth.
- Intestinal worms and mites in wild-caught animals. Quarantine new animals, and have a faecal sample examined.
- Stress and emaciation in wild-caught animals, which is a frequent cause of early death.
- Egg-laying difficulty (dystocia) in females without a suitable place to dig.

A healthy animal has clear eyes, a plump tail base, smooth skin and regular digestion. Animals that lose weight, do not eat or breathe with the mouth open must go to a vet experienced with reptiles. A strong animal weighing several kilos can be hard to handle, so arrange transport and handling with the vet in advance.

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.

The full guide with map and updates: herpy.org/en/lacertids/tupinambis-teguixin