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POISON DART FROGS

Cordillera Azul Poison Frog

Ameerega rubriventris

Ameerega rubriventris is a small, dark poison dart frog of 21-25 mm with pale side stripes and a red-black or orange-black marbled belly. It lives only in the forests of the Cordillera Azul in central Peru and is threatened. The species is rarely kept, and little is known about its care.

Family: Dendrobatidae Former name: *Epipedobates rubriventris*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**21-25 mm** snout-vent length
Lifespan	**10-15 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial**
Habitat	**Rainforest**
Skin toxins in the wild	**Mild**
Skin toxins in captivity	**None** Captive-bred animals. Wild-caught animals can keep their toxins for a long time
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**50 × 50 × 50 cm** L × W × H for 2 adults
Temperature, day	**25-28 °C**
Temperature, night	**21-25 °C**
Humidity	**70-100%**
Water	**Water dish** depth 1-2 cm
UVB	**Optional** Ferguson zone 1
Diet	**Small invertebrates (springtails, fruit flies)**
Kept	**In pairs**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Development	**Tadpoles carried to water**
Egg-laying site	**On the ground**
Eggs per clutch	**4-16**
Hatching	**10-22 days**
Larval period	**70-90 days** from hatching to metamorphosis
Larval diet	**Algae/plants and complete diet**
Parental care	**Guards the eggs and carries the tadpoles**

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Appendix II**
IUCN	**Endangered (EN)**

About the species

Ameerega rubriventris is a small poison dart frog of 21-25 mm from snout to vent. Males are slightly smaller than females, and this is the only described difference between the sexes. The back is dark blackish-brown, marbled in some animals, with cream or copper stripes along the sides and a cream or pink lip stripe that may be broken. There are yellow spots above the armpits, in the groin and on the calves, and the belly has a red-black or orange-black net pattern. The limbs are grey to brown. The skin on the back and hind legs is granular. The species has no teeth.

A. rubriventris was described in 1997 as *Epipedobates rubriventris* and for a time was regarded as a subspecies of *Ameerega hahneli*. It is now placed in the genus *Ameerega*.

In the wild the skin contains toxins that the frog takes up from its food; how toxic this particular species is has not been documented. Animals raised on feeder insects are free of toxins. Even so, avoid skin contact and wash your hands after working in the enclosure.

Distribution and habitat

Ameerega rubriventris is known only from a small area of central Peru: the forests of the Cordillera Azul mountain range in the Ucayali region, including around Boquerón del Padre Abad, and a single record in the neighbouring Huánuco region. The species occurs from about 300 to 1,000 m above sea level, and part of its range lies within Cordillera Azul National Park.

> **Native range:** Peru.

HABITAT

Ameerega rubriventris lives in the leaf litter on the floor of dense, humid forest, both primary and secondary forest, on the lower slopes of the mountains. The climate is warm and humid all year, with rain most of the time, and the nights are a few degrees cooler than the days.

The female lays her eggs on the ground, and the male carries the tadpoles to water once they have hatched. The threats are deforestation for timber, subsistence farming, cattle and plantations of ornamental trees. Illegal collection for the trade occurs but is not regarded as a main threat. The IUCN assesses the species as threatened, and it is protected in Peru.

Read more: Rearing tadpoles

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Little is known about the care of *Ameerega rubriventris*. The climate in the mountain forests of the Cordillera Azul is warm and humid all year, and the species is kept like other small *Ameerega* species from the leaf litter of the rainforest. *Ameerega hahneli*, with which the species was formerly grouped, and the equally small *Ameerega bilinguis* have the same requirements.

A pair needs an enclosure of at least 50 × 50 × 50 cm (length × width × height). The species lives on the ground but readily climbs, so set it up on several levels with roots, branches and cork bark. A rain system and a fogger make it easier to maintain the climate. Front doors and a ventilation strip in the top allow air exchange without drying out the enclosure.

Set it up to resemble the forest floor: a drainage layer at the bottom, a damp, loose substrate of coconut fibre and leaf mould, and a thick layer of leaf litter. Add bark, cork tubes and roots to provide plenty of hiding places, and plant ferns and broad-leaved plants. Springtails and small isopods keep the substrate clean and are extra food.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation Read more: Terrarium construction and bioactive substrate Read more: Feeder animals: keeping and breeding

TEMPERATURE

The daytime temperature is 25-28 °C, and at night it is lowered by 3-4 degrees to 21-25 °C. The temperature varies only 1-2 degrees over the year, and a winter rest period is not necessary.

Sustained heat above 28 °C stresses the frogs, and an enclosure in direct sun can reach lethal temperatures within a few hours. Place the enclosure out of the sun, and measure the temperature down by the substrate. If the room is cold, a heat mat on the side of the enclosure can raise the temperature.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND MISTING

Humidity should be 70-80 % by day and close to 100 % morning and evening, ideally with mist. A rain system or a misting machine on a timer makes this easy; otherwise spray thoroughly morning and evening. The floor and leaf litter should be damp, but not sopping wet, and the surface may dry out a little between sprayings, because still, saturated air causes fungus and skin problems.

Use rainwater, reverse-osmosis water or dechlorinated water with no additives.

WATER AND WATER QUALITY

A shallow water bowl with 1-2 cm of water is enough, and it should be easy to get in and out of. Use rainwater, reverse osmosis water or dechlorinated tap water, and change the water every other day so that bacteria do not build up. Amphibians absorb water and substances through the skin, so clean the bowl without soap and rinse it well.

LIGHTING AND UVB

The light should primarily serve the plants: an LED plant lamp for 10-12 hours a day and a clear night. UVB is not necessary for poison dart frogs; a weak UVB lamp (Ferguson zone 1) is optional. Give the frogs both bright and shaded places.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

The frogs eat small live arthropods: fruit flies (*Drosophila melanogaster* and, for adults, also *D. hydei*), springtails, micro crickets, small isopods and sieved meadow plankton. The species is small, so the smallest feeder insects are the most important. Adults are fed three to four times a week with as much as they eat in a short time; juveniles are fed daily. Dust the feeder insects with calcium at every feeding and with a vitamin and mineral supplement once or twice a week.

Remove dead and leftover feeder insects so that fungus does not attack them.

Read more: Calcium, vitamins and supplements

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Ameerega rubriventris is diurnal and stays mainly on the forest floor, but readily climbs. The male calls with a bird-like peeping, most often 2-3 short whistles in a row. The genus is territorial, and males call from fixed spots, so a pair is the safe way to keep them; several males together can cause stress and fighting, especially in a small enclosure.

The frogs should not be handled. Their skin is delicate, and skin contact can harm them. When cleaning, move them with a clean, dampened plastic container.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Males are slightly smaller than females, and the male is the one that calls. The age at sexual maturity has not been documented. The surest way to obtain a pair is to raise several young together and select a calling male and a larger female.

MATING

Mating has not been described in detail for *A. rubriventris*. In the genus it is triggered by rain: a week with slightly less spraying followed by heavy rain imitates the rainy season. The male calls, lures the female to a hidden spot, and the pair lay eggs on land.

EGGS AND TADPOLES

The female lays the eggs on the ground, and the male carries the tadpoles to water once they have hatched. The number of eggs and the development times have not been documented for the species; the figures are borrowed from *Ameerega bilinguis*, which is the same size: 4-16 eggs per clutch. The eggs are laid in a damp hiding place, for example in a film canister or a petri dish under a coconut shell. A small dish of water should be ready for the tadpoles.

The tadpoles can be raised individually in small containers with rainwater or reverse osmosis water. They are fed algae, flake food and softened plant food, and the water is changed every third day.

METAMORPHOSIS

The eggs hatch after 10-22 days, and the tadpoles reach metamorphosis after 70-90 days (the figures are borrowed from *Ameerega bilinguis*). Once the front legs appear, the water should be shallow, and there must be easy access to damp land. The frogs stop eating during the transformation and live off the tail.

REARING THE YOUNG

The newly metamorphosed froglets are very small and need tiny feeder insects: springtails and the smallest fruit flies. Feed them daily, dust with calcium and vitamins, and keep the humidity high. Give them plenty of hiding places in a small rearing enclosure until they are large enough to be put together in pairs.

Health and common mistakes

There is no species-specific knowledge about diseases in *Ameerega rubriventris*, so the advice is the general advice for poison dart frogs:

- Skin and fungal infections are caused by stagnant, saturated air and a dirty substrate. Provide ventilation and fresh leaf litter.
- Overheating is quickly fatal. Keep the enclosure below 28 °C.
- A lack of calcium and vitamins causes deformed jaws and weak limbs. Dust the food at every feeding.
- Parasites (for example worms) require a vet with knowledge of amphibians.
- Animals with no appetite, sluggish movements or an emaciated hind body should be examined by a vet.

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.