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SKINKS

Monkey Skink

Corucia zebrata

The world's largest skink: a calm, arboreal herbivore from the Solomon Islands with a prehensile tail that works like a fifth limb. *Corucia zebrata* lives in family groups, gives birth to large, live young and requires a tall, humid and well-ventilated enclosure and plenty of fresh leaves. A species for the experienced keeper with patience.

Family: Scincidae

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**60-80 cm** total length incl. tail
Weight	**500-850 g**
Lifespan	**15-25 years**
Active	**At dusk and at night**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal**
Habitat	**Rainforest**
Difficulty	**Experienced**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**120 × 60 × 120 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**24-28 °C**
Basking spot	**29-31 °C**
Temperature, night	**21-24 °C**
Humidity	**70-80%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Recommended** Ferguson zone 2
Diet	**Fruit and plants**
Kept	**Singly, in pairs or in groups**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Live-bearing**
Litter size	**1-2 young**
Gestation	**180-240 days**

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Appendix II**
EU annex	**Annex B**
IUCN	**Near Threatened (NT)**

About the species

Corucia zebrata is the world's largest skink. Adults grow to 60-80 cm including the tail, which makes up more than half the length, and weigh 500-850 g. The body is long and sturdy with short, strong legs, and the head is triangular with small, round eyes. The scales are dark green, often with light brown or black dots, and the belly ranges from pale yellow to various shades of green. The toes have thick, curved claws that give a secure grip on the branches.

The tail is sturdy and fully prehensile, and the animal uses it as a fifth limb when climbing. Unlike most other skinks, the species cannot shed its tail. The jaws are strong, but the teeth are small and are used to cut plant food. The species orients itself mainly by smell and the tongue, but also has good eyesight. The species name *zebrata* refers to the zebra-like bands that most animals have.

There are two subspecies. *C. z. alfredschmidti* from the north-western islands has black sclera and is slightly smaller and lighter than the nominate form *C. z. zebrata*, which has white sclera. Males have a broader head and a slimmer body than females and a V-shaped pattern of scales at the vent, which females lack.

The species is calm and slow in its movements, but an adult skink can bite hard if pressed. Droppings are frequent and smell strongly, and this must be allowed for in daily care.

Distribution and habitat

Corucia zebrata is found in the Solomon Islands in the south-western Pacific. The nominate form lives on Choiseul, New Georgia, Santa Isabel, Guadalcanal, Nggela, Malaita, Makira, Ugi and Owaraha. *C. z. alfredschmidti* is found on Bougainville and Buka, which geographically belong to the Solomon Islands but politically to Papua New Guinea, and on the Shortland Islands. The type locality is Makira (formerly San Cristobal).

The population is under pressure from extensive logging and hunting, because the species is eaten locally. The large export to the pet trade previously hit the populations hard.

> **Native range:** Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.

HABITAT

The species lives exclusively in the trees, up in the forest canopy. Adults typically hold a territory in a single tree, often a strangler fig (*Ficus*), when food plants grow in the crown. It is also found in trees in partly cleared forest and in cultivated gardens, as long as the food plants are there.

During the day the animal sleeps in tree hollows or pressed against a branch, and it is active at dusk and at night. The animals live in small family groups, a so-called circulus, with adults and young of different ages. Both males and females defend the group and can be hostile towards unfamiliar skinks. The Solomon Islands lie close to the equator, so the climate is warm and humid with little variation through the year. Temperature and humidity in the species' habitats have not been measured.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

The species lives in the trees all its life and needs a tall enclosure. An adult skink needs at least 120 × 60 × 120 cm (length × width × height), and height is more important than floor area. A pair or a small group needs correspondingly more space. In a smaller enclosure there is too little climbing space, and droppings accumulate quickly.

Furnish with sturdy, horizontal branches at least as thick as the animal's body and firmly fixed, because an adult skink is heavy enough to pull loose parts down. Place cork platforms at several heights and at least two closed hides at different heights, where the animal can squeeze in and sleep. Live plants such as pothos and philodendron give cover and humidity and are readily eaten.

Use a moisture-retaining substrate of coconut fibre at a depth of 8-10 cm, preferably as a bioactive substrate with springtails and woodlice. Avoid pine and cedar shavings, which give off harmful fumes, and sand, which can cause constipation. The enclosure must be well ventilated, for example with mesh low down on one side and high up on the opposite one, so the air moves without draughts. Stagnant, humid air causes respiratory infections. Doors at the front are better than an opening in the top, because movements from above seem threatening.

Read more: Terrarium construction and bioactive substrate Read more: Feeder animals: keeping and breeding

TEMPERATURE

The species needs moderate warmth. During the day the temperature must be 24-28 °C, and a warm spot high up in the enclosure may reach 29-31 °C. At night it may fall to 21-24 °C. Overheating is a greater danger than slightly too low temperatures, because the species is adapted to the even conditions in a tropical tree canopy.

Use a heat bulb or a ceramic heater in a fitting above mesh, so the animal cannot touch the bulb, and let the heat come from above, where the animal sits. A heat panel under the ceiling gives an even warmth without a sharp hot spot. All heat sources must be controlled by a thermostat. Heat from below helps only a little, because the species is rarely on the floor. Measure the temperature at the height where the animal sleeps and eats.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

The humidity must be 70-80 %. It is maintained by misting 2-3 times a day or an automatic misting system, a damp substrate and live plants. A hygrometer at the animal's own height shows whether the level holds. Humidity that is too low causes problems with shedding and desiccation, and humidity that is too high without air exchange causes respiratory infections and bacterial growth, so ventilation is just as important as misting.

Change the water in a shallow dish every day. Many animals prefer to drink droplets from leaves and branches, so mist thoroughly, and use a drip system if the animal does not drink from the dish. Wrinkled skin, sunken eyes and difficulty shedding are signs of too little fluid.

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species is most active at dusk and can be kept without UVB if D3 is given through the food, but a weak UVB light is recommended. Ferguson zone 2 is an estimate based on the species' way of life in shade and dusk. Use a T5 tube with about 6 % UVB, mounted inside the enclosure or directly above mesh, because glass and plastic block almost all UVB. The nearest perch must be 20-30 cm from the tube, and there must be dense foliage and hides without UV.

Keep a day length of 12 hours all year, as at the equator. Daylight-coloured LED light gives ordinary illumination and is good for the plants. Light that is dimmed slowly up and down in the morning and evening suits a crepuscular species. Replace the UVB tube according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Read more: Lighting and UVB Read more: Calcium, vitamins and supplements

FEEDING

Corucia zebrata is a herbivore and in the wild eats leaves, flowers, fruit and shoots of several plants, including *Epipremnum*, which the animal tolerates despite the many oxalate crystals. The diet must be varied and fresh. The foundation is dark green leaves such as kale, mustard greens, dandelion leaves and endive, which make up by far the greater part of the food. Supplement with green beans, courgette, sweet potato, bell pepper and sugar snap peas. Fruit such as banana, mango, papaya, fig and berries is given only in small amounts, because the sugar causes stomach problems. The animal readily eats flowers of hibiscus, dandelion and nasturtium.

Dust the vegetables lightly with calcium 2-3 times a week, and give a reptile vitamin supplement once a week. Spinach and beet leaves should not be a regular food, because they bind the calcium. The species still reacts to the smell of insects, but animal food is unnecessary and should at most be a rare exception.

Give the food in the evening, when the animal is awake, and remove leftovers in the morning, so they do not go mouldy in the humid air. An adult skink eats large quantities, so expect a large consumption of fresh vegetables. Young eat droppings from the adults to acquire the gut bacteria needed to digest plant food.

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

The species is calm and deliberate in its movements and seldom flees. If it feels threatened, it opens its mouth and hisses, and an adult skink can bite painfully through the skin. Back away when it warns, and never pull an animal off a branch. The prehensile tail is very strong, so loosen it carefully, or wait until the animal lets go by itself.

Taming takes weeks to months. Sit by the enclosure during the animal's active time, then put your hand in without grabbing for the animal, and let the skink climb up by itself. Support the whole body, and let the tail get a hold. Many animals learn to know their regular keepers. Keep sessions calm and short.

In the wild the species lives in family groups, and animals in captivity often rest close together. Unfamiliar animals are not always accepted into an established group, and both males and females can be aggressive towards newcomers. A single animal does fine, but a pair or a small family group best matches the nature of the species. During the day the skink lies almost motionless, and that is normal.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The animals grow slowly and are fully grown only after 3-4 years. The age at sexual maturity is not known. Males have a broader head, a slimmer body and a V-shaped pattern of scales at the vent, which females lack. Use the pattern and the head shape, not size, to sex the animals, and have a vet confirm it if you are in doubt.

MATING

The mating season and what triggers mating are not known. The species is social, and a stable pair or a family group does best. New animals are not always accepted into a group. Animals from different islands often do not produce young together, probably because the populations on the islands differ, so put together breeding pairs of animals with known and identical origin. Captive breeding is slow, because only one young is born at a time and gestation is long.

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

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The species gives birth to live young and does not lay eggs. The female nourishes the foetus through a placenta, a rare trait in reptiles. Gestation lasts 6-8 months, and almost always one young is born. Twins occur, and triplets are a great rarity. With the long gestation there is at most one birth a year.

Around birth the female is very protective and can be aggressive towards other animals. Adults may eat newborn young, and stillbirths occur, so a pregnant female is often moved to an enclosure of her own before birth. Give her peace, several hides and plenty of food. The young one eats the foetal membranes and eats nothing else for the first two days.

INCUBATION

There are no eggs to incubate, because the young are born live. Gestation lasts 6-8 months, corresponding to the figure in the box. The female needs plenty of calcium, D3 and a varied diet throughout gestation. Keep temperature and humidity stable, avoid stress, and do not handle her unnecessarily.

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are large at birth, about a third of the adults' length. In the nominate form they are about 30 cm long and weigh 175 g, in *C. z. alfredschmidti* about 29 cm and 80 g. In the wild they stay in the family group for 6-12 months and are protected by both the parents and other adults. Around the age of one year, sometimes earlier, they move out to form a new group. If the young one lives on its own, it needs a smaller but equally tall and humid enclosure with the same conditions as the adults.

Give the same vegetables as to the adults, finely chopped and every day, and ensure calcium and D3. The young acquire their gut bacteria by eating droppings from adults, so give them access to fresh droppings from healthy adults if they do not live in the group. Weigh them regularly. Growth is slow, and they are fully grown only after 3-4 years.

Health and common mistakes

Corucia zebrata seldom becomes ill under the right conditions, and most problems are caused by humidity and air. The typical ones are:

- Respiratory infection at high humidity without ventilation. The signs are wheezing breathing, open mouth, mucus at the nostrils and reduced appetite.
- Problems with shedding at too low humidity. The skin is shed in flakes over several days, and remnants on the toes, tail tip and around the eyes can cut off the blood supply. Soften them with a short, lukewarm bath, or mist more.
- Desiccation, which shows as wrinkled skin and sunken eyes.
- Lack of calcium and D3 from a one-sided diet.
- Bacteria from the plentiful droppings in the warm, humid enclosure. Clean every day.
- Parasites in wild-caught animals, which are found with a faecal sample at the vet.

Find a vet with reptile experience before you need one. Contact the vet in case of weight loss, lack of appetite or breathing difficulty.

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.