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SKINKS

Gidgee Skink

Egernia stokesii

A robust, social skink with a spiny tail from semi-arid Australia. *Egernia stokesii* lives in permanent family groups in rock crevices and hollow logs, gives birth to live young and can block its hide with its spiny tail. It needs heat, UVB and an enclosure with solid rock structures.

Family: Scincidae Former name: *Silubosaurus stokesii*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**21-28 cm** total length incl. tail
Weight	**100-200 g**
Lifespan	**10-25 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal and rock-dwelling**
Habitat	**Semi-desert and rocky terrain**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**120 × 60 × 60 cm** L × W × H for 2 adults
Temperature, day	**27-32 °C**
Basking spot	**43-49 °C**
Temperature, night	**21-27 °C**
Humidity	**40-60%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Essential** Ferguson zone 3
Diet	**Insects, fruit and plants**
Kept	**In pairs or in groups**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Live-bearing**
Litter size	**1-8 young**
Clutches per year	**1**
Gestation	**90 days**

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Appendix III**
EU annex	**Annex C**
IUCN	**Least Concern (LC)**

About the species

Egernia stokesii is a compact, stocky skink with short legs, a broad body and a short, flat tail covered with sharp spines. The dorsal scales are keeled from the neck to the tip of the tail, and the colour ranges from olive brown and dark brown to rusty red with scattered, paler scales. The underside is white to yellow. The body from snout to vent is 16-21 cm in adults, and the tail is only about a third as long, so the total length is 21-28 cm. Adults weigh 100-200 g. The tail cannot be dropped.

The tail is used as a plug: the animal wedges itself into a crevice, fills the opening with its spiny tail and inflates its body, so that a predator cannot pull it out. The legs are so short that the animal glides on its belly when it moves. It is not fast, but can move briskly when warm.

Three subspecies are usually distinguished: *E. s. stokesii* on the Houtman Abrolhos Islands, *E. s. badia* on the mainland of Western Australia (including the former *E. s. aethiops* from Baudin Island) and *E. s. zellingi* in eastern and central Australia. There are no colour morphs in the trade.

Distribution and habitat

Egernia stokesii occurs in semi-arid Australia in a wide but broken range from the far west of New South Wales and southern Queensland through South Australia and the Northern Territory to the south-western interior of Western Australia. The species is also found on several islands off the west coast of Western Australia, including Houtman Abrolhos and Baudin Island in Shark Bay.

The populations are fragmented and tied to rocky areas and woodland where there are hiding places. The species occurs only in Australia. The population is declining because of agriculture, mining and changed fire patterns, and the subspecies *E. s. badia* is regarded as threatened.

> **Native range:** Australia.

HABITAT

The species lives in scrub and open woodland, often on rock outcrops, and hides between stones, in split trees, hollow logs and other cavities. It often lives among acacia trees. Each group has a permanent territory with a few preferred crevices that all members use, and a communal spot for defecation outside the crevices. The animals can tell group members from strangers by scent.

The animals are diurnal. They bask close together at the entrance to the hide and withdraw when it gets too hot or a predator approaches. Active animals have a body temperature of about 33 °C. The climate is semi-arid with warm summers and cool winters. The food is flowers, leaves, fruit and the arthropods the animal can catch, especially beetles and grasshoppers.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Egernia stokesii lives in groups, and the enclosure must be large enough for them. A pair or a small group of up to three needs at least 120 × 60 × 60 cm (length × width × height). A single animal can be kept in 90 × 45 × 40 cm, but larger is better.

The substrate should be sand or sandy soil in a layer at least 10 cm deep. Build crevices and caves from flat stones, slate and cork, and place them directly on the floor of the enclosure so that they cannot be undermined. There must be at least two hides and a large, flat basking stone. Keep the substrate under a hide at the cool end slightly damp so that the animal can choose. The enclosure must have a tight, escape-proof lid.

TEMPERATURE

The enclosure must have a clear gradient. The basking spot should be 43-49 °C, measured on the surface with an infrared thermometer, and the cool end should be about 27 °C. The daytime temperature in the background is 27-32 °C. Use one or more halogen spots at one end; ceramic heaters and heat mats are not enough as the only heat source.

At night the temperature may fall to 21-27 °C. If the room becomes colder, use a light-free heater on a thermostat. The species loves warmth, and too low a temperature causes poor appetite and digestion.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

The species comes from semi-arid regions, but thrives best at a humidity of 40-60 %. Mist the enclosure lightly in the morning a couple of times a week, and keep a damp hide at the cool end.

The animals lick droplets from surfaces, but must also have a stable, shallow bowl of fresh water every day. The bowl is washed every week.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species is diurnal and needs UVB for as long as the light is on. A T5 HO tube in a reflector, covering about half of the terrarium's length, gives Ferguson zone 3. The zone is an estimate based on the way of life and the close relative *Egernia cunninghami*. Place the basking spot so that the animal's back is 15-30 cm from the tube; the distance depends on the strength of the tube and on whether it sits over mesh. UVB does not penetrate glass or plastic.

Supplement with strong, white daylight so that the terrarium is bright. The light period is 12-14 hours in summer and shorter in winter. Replace the tube according to the manufacturer's instructions, because the UVB output declines with time.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Egernia stokesii is omnivorous. In the wild adults eat mostly plants: leaves, flowers, fruit and seeds, and the plant share is largest in summer. Young animals eat more insects than adults. Therefore give adults a large share of greens and young animals more animal food.

Give greens and wild herbs such as dandelion, cabbage and rocket, chopped vegetables such as squash and sweet potato, and flowers and a little fruit as a treat. In addition, insects such as cockroaches, crickets, mealworms, superworms, snails and earthworms. Small amounts of lean minced meat or pet food can be included, but should not make up much.

Young animals are fed daily, adults three times a week. Give as much as the animal eats in about 5 minutes. Dust insects and greens with calcium, and give a vitamin supplement once a week.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

The species is social and lives in family groups with a pair, young and half-grown offspring from several litters. It can be kept in pairs or in a small group, especially if the animals have grown up together. Unfamiliar adults can come into serious conflict, so new animals are introduced only after quarantine and under supervision, and they must be separated if they fight. Do not keep a male and a female together unless you want young.

The animals are shy and rarely like being handled, but become more trusting when fed from tongs. Calm behaviour and fixed routines reduce stress. A threatened animal retreats into its hide and puffs itself up, so that it is difficult to get out.

Read more: Quarantine and hygiene

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The sexes are difficult to tell apart externally, and reliable sexing requires a vet who can examine the vent with an endoscope. Females are sexually mature at a snout-vent length of about 17 cm. In the wild the species becomes sexually mature only after five to six years; in enclosures with plentiful food it may happen faster, but the age has not been documented.

MATING

The species is distinctly monogamous, and most males sire only one litter. A permanent pair is kept together in a large enclosure with enough hides. The course of mating and any winter rest have not been documented for animals in captivity, but a cooler period with shorter days in winter matches the rhythm of nature.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The species gives birth to live young. A litter is 1-8 young, and the number rises with the size of the female. The female gives birth to at most one litter a year, and not all females breed every year. In eastern Australia the young are born in February and March, that is, in late summer. The birth of a whole litter can take from one to twelve days.

INCUBATION

There are no eggs to incubate. Gestation lasts up to about three months. Give the female extra food, calcium and UVB, and keep the terrarium quiet. The young are born head first in foetal membranes with a yolk sac, and the female or the young often eat the membranes afterwards.

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are 7-10 cm from snout to vent and weigh about 8 g at birth. In the wild the young stay in the family group until they are sexually mature, but adults can also kill young. Therefore keep an eye on the adults, and remove the young if aggression is seen. Keep siblings together in a terrarium with sand, hides and UVB. Give small insects and finely chopped greens daily, dusted with calcium.

Health and common mistakes

Egernia stokesii is hardy when temperature, light and substrate are right. The typical problems are:

- Calcium deficiency and brittle bones from too little UVB and a one-sided diet.
- Fungal infection of the belly and feet from a persistently damp substrate.
- Obesity from too much fatty food and little exercise.
- Internal and external parasites, especially in new animals.
- Fighting injuries and stress when kept too closely or restlessly, especially unfamiliar adults.

Quarantine new animals for at least a month before they are put together with others. The animals hide illness well, so contact a vet with experience in reptiles if there is a change in appetite, weight loss or swellings.

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.