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SKINKS

Tree Skink

Egernia striolata

A medium-sized, diurnal and highly social skink from the dry woodlands of eastern Australia. *Egernia striolata* lives in crevices in trees and rocks, lives in small family groups and gives birth to live young. It needs a tall enclosure with many narrow hiding places, a warm basking spot and UVB.

Family: Scincidae Former name: *Tropidolepisma striolatum; Tropidolepisma dorsale*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**10-12 cm** snout-vent length
Lifespan	**10 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Arboreal and rock-dwelling**
Habitat	**Dry forest and rocky terrain**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**80 × 50 × 60 cm** L × W × H for 2 adults
Temperature, day	**25-30 °C**
Basking spot	**35-40 °C**
Temperature, night	**18-24 °C**
Humidity	**30-50%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Essential** Ferguson zone 3
Diet	**Insects, fruit and plants**
Kept	**In pairs or in groups**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Live-bearing**
Sexually mature	**24-36 months**
Litter size	**1-6 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 striolata is a sturdily built skink with a deep head, short legs and a thick, tapering tail. The ground colour is dark black to greyish brown, often with scattered white spots and dots. A pale stripe runs from the head along the side of the back to the base of the tail, and a dark band runs from the eye to the groin. The lip scales are white or cream, and the belly is often lemon yellow or pale orange. The pupil is a narrow vertical slit.

Adults measure 10-12 cm from snout to vent, and newborn young about 5 cm. The species is smaller than *Egernia cunninghami* and *E. stokesii* and lacks the heavy spiny covering on the tail that the two have.

The species is diurnal and basks in the warmest hours. It is among the most studied social lizards, because it can recognise its relatives by scent and adjusts its behaviour according to whom it meets. Australia does not permit the export of wild reptiles, so all animals outside the country are captive-bred.

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

Distribution and habitat

Egernia striolata occurs in eastern and inland Australia: Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and southern Northern Territory, as well as the Australian Capital Territory. The species is absent from the coast and from the highest parts of the Great Dividing Range. The range is large and the population stable.

Animals from the isolated mountain area of Mount Kaputar in New South Wales were regarded as *E. striolata* until they proved in 2019 to be a separate lineage, so older records may cover more than one form.

> **Native range:** Australia.

HABITAT

The species lives in open woodland, scrub and low forest, where it lives in hollow trees and trunks, behind loose bark and in rock crevices. In New South Wales it lives mostly in trees and stumps, in South Australia mostly on rocks and under exfoliating rock slabs. It also uses fence posts and ruins. It prefers places with many crevices of different sizes and sunlit, raised spots.

The animals live in pairs or in small family groups of 2-10 animals, consisting of parents and their offspring. The young stay with the parents until they are sexually mature. Each group has a permanent refuge and deposits droppings in piles at the entrance, which mark the territory. The diet consists of larger, hard-bodied insects such as beetles, ants, grasshoppers and cockroaches, and plants make up about 40% of the diet. Mating takes place in September and October.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Egernia striolata uses height and climbs a lot. A pair needs at least 80 × 50 × 60 cm (length × width × height). A group of up to six animals can be kept in the same size when there are many climbing and hiding places at height; the number of crevices matters more than floor area.

Build many narrow crevices at several heights: flat pieces of cork, slate slabs leaned against the back wall, branches and vertical stacks of thin slabs with small gaps. Crevices of different widths ensure that small animals can hide from the adults. Place stones directly on the bottom so they cannot be undermined. Use bark, coconut fibre and soil as substrate, and avoid fine sand. The enclosure must have a tight, escape-proof lid and good ventilation.

The animals deposit droppings in the same place, so the piles can be removed regularly without the whole enclosure having to be cleaned.

TEMPERATURE

By day the air should be 25-30 °C with a clear gradient. Under a lamp at one end the basking spot should reach 35-40 °C, measured with an infrared thermometer. A vertical stack of slabs up towards the lamp provides a vertical gradient, with the top the warmest.

At night the temperature may fall to 18-24 °C. Winter is slightly cooler with shorter days. Animals to be bred can be given a cooler night of about 16-18 °C and a day length of eight hours for a couple of months, after which the light is increased again over several weeks.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

The species comes from dry to semi-arid woodland, and humidity should be 30-50%; the figure is an estimate based on the habitat. Do not mist the enclosure daily, but keep the substrate dry and provide a slightly damp hide during shedding.

A shallow, stable dish of fresh water should always be available. Change the water daily.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

Egernia striolata is diurnal and basks a great deal. A UVB tube in a reflector over the basking spot should give UVB corresponding to Ferguson zone 3, as for *Egernia cunninghami* and *Egernia stokesii*. Position the basking spot so that the animal's back is at least 20 cm from the tube. UVB does not penetrate glass or plastic, and tubes are replaced according to the

manufacturer's instructions.

Supplement with strong, white daylight. The light period is 12-14 hours in summer and shorter in winter. Several basking spots reduce competition between the animals.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Egernia striolata is omnivorous. Offer insects such as crickets, cockroaches, mealworms and grasshoppers, and supplement with finely chopped greens, wild plants such as dandelion and clover, and a little fruit. Plants make up about 40% of the diet in the wild.

Young animals are fed four times a week, adults two to three times. Dust the insects with calcium three times a week and with a vitamin supplement once a week. Mashed meat and fruit without seasoning, enriched with calcium and vitamins, are also readily taken and can be used as a supplement; this reduces competition for the insects. Use several food dishes so that weaker animals are not kept away.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

The species is highly social and prefers to live together, even when there is room to live alone. A pair or a group of three to six animals that have grown up together works best. Unfamiliar adults are difficult to introduce, and both sexes may fight.

If animals are to be put together, all must enter the enclosure at the same time, early in the morning, so they can be monitored. There must be far more hiding places and food dishes than animals. Chasing and nipping may subside, but biting and rolling require the animals to be separated. An animal that has been pushed out of the group should not be put back, but kept alone or with other outcasts.

The animals become tame from being fed with tweezers, but flee quickly, and the tail may be shed if they are grabbed by it.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The animals become sexually mature after 2-3 years. The sexes are hard to tell apart as young. Adult males have a more solid head with heavier cheeks, and pregnant females have a distinctly rounded belly. If breeding is the aim, start with a group of at least six young so there is a good chance of at least one pair.

MATING

The species is monogamous, and pairs stay together for a long time. In the wild the animals mate in September and October. A cool, short winter with shorter days promotes mating in the enclosure, but how much the cold matters is not documented. Females can store sperm and give birth to young more than a year after mating.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The species gives birth to live young. A litter is 1-6 young, most often 2-3, and the first litter is typically small. The female has no more than one litter a year. The young are born over one to two days and are found early in the morning sitting on branches.

INCUBATION

There are no eggs to incubate. The length of gestation is not documented for the species; the roughly 90 days is borrowed from the close relative *Egernia stokesii*. Give the pregnant female extra food, calcium and UVB, and keep the enclosure quiet. There must be many crevices where the young can hide from the adults.

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are shy and hide in narrow crevices. Well-fed adults often leave the young alone, but adult *Egernia* can be aggressive towards young and eat them, so there must be crevices that the adults cannot enter, and the young are removed once the whole litter is born. A roll of thin cork with folds too narrow for the adults works as a trap, and in the evening the young can be tapped out of it. Raise them in a small, escape-proof enclosure with many hiding places, UVB and small insects daily, dusted with calcium.

Health and common mistakes

Egernia striolata 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.
- Bite injuries, weight loss and stress in animals pushed out of the group.
- Intestinal impaction from fine sand or food pieces that are too large.
- Obesity from too much fat and little exercise.
- Internal and external parasites, especially in new animals.

The species can live to about 10 years. Quarantine new animals for at least a month. The animals hide illness well, so contact a vet experienced in reptiles if there is a change in appetite, weight loss or swellings.

Read more: Quarantine and hygiene

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.