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SKINKS

Western Blue-Tongued Lizard

Tiliqua occipitalis

Tiliqua occipitalis is a sturdy, terrestrial skink from southern and central Australia with brown crossbands over the body and tail and the broad, blue tongue that characterises the genus. The species reaches about 40 cm in length, is diurnal and omnivorous and needs a large enclosure with UVB and a warm basking spot. It gives birth to live young and is seldom seen in captivity.

Family: Scincidae Former name: *Cyclodus occipitalis; Cyclodus fasciatus*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**35-45 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**15-20 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial**
Habitat	**Semi-desert and temperate woodland and meadow**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**120 × 60 × 60 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**22-32 °C**
Basking spot	**35-45 °C**
Temperature, night	**15-22 °C**
Humidity	**30-50%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Recommended** Ferguson zone 3
Diet	**Insects, fruit, plants, vertebrates and worms/snails**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Live-bearing**
Litter size	**5 young**
Clutches per year	**1**
Gestation	**90-120 days**

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

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

About the species

Tiliqua occipitalis belongs to the blue-tongued skinks, a genus of heavy, tubular skinks with short legs, a triangular head and a broad, blue tongue, which the animal displays when it feels threatened. The body is broad and sturdy in proportion to the short legs. The ground colour is light to medium brown with broad, dark brown crossbands over the body and tail, the underside is pale, and behind each eye there is a distinct black stripe. The tongue is blue and stands in sharp contrast to the pink mouth lining.

Adults reach about 40 cm in length, large animals up to 45 cm, and the species is thus smaller than *Tiliqua scincoides*. The sexes are hard to tell apart externally. The species was described in 1863 and has previously been placed as *Cyclodus occipitalis* and *Cyclodus fasciatus*. The species name probably comes from Latin occiput, back of the head, and refers to the elongated scales behind the parietal scutes.

If the threat display does not work, the skink hisses and flattens its body to look larger. It has small, peg-shaped teeth and powerful jaws, and a bite can be painful and draw blood. New animals are cautious at first, but settle in and tolerate quiet, calm handling. Animals that have not been in contact with humans for a few days return to the defensive behaviour with open mouth and hissing, but it disappears quickly again.

The species is kept far less often than the large, common blue-tongued skinks, and much of the care is based on the genus as a whole.

Distribution and habitat

Tiliqua occipitalis lives in southern and central Australia. The main range is in Western Australia, where the species is found throughout the south-west except for the cool forests. In the east it is scattered: in the southernmost part of the Northern Territory, in two separate populations in South Australia, in northern Victoria and in central and western New South Wales. It has also been reported from Queensland. The type locality is at Loos near Gawler in South Australia.

In the eastern part of the range the species is rare and regarded as threatened. Clearing of mallee, hunting by foxes and cats and destruction of rabbit warrens, which the animals use as hides, are the greatest threats.

> **Native range:** Australia.

HABITAT

The species lives in dry to semi-arid regions: coastal dunes, open woodland, mallee scrub, heath, tussock grassland and sand plains with scattered bushes, on sandy, clayey or loamy soil. At night and in bad weather it lies under leaf litter, stones or in abandoned rabbit warrens. The animal is diurnal, but can also be active at night in warm weather. The food is insects, spiders, snails, carrion and plants, especially berries. The skink is not fast and takes mostly slow-moving prey, and the powerful jaws crush snail shells and beetle armour.

In the south-west the summers are hot and dry and the winters cooler and wetter. In the cool months the skink lies hidden under leaf litter and dry grass and is largely inactive. It is this rhythm, with a warm, bright summer half-year and a cool resting period, that is imitated in the enclosure.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult animal needs an enclosure of at least 120 × 60 × 60 cm (length × width × height). Larger is better. Floor area is more important than height, because the animal lives on the ground.

The skink is best kept alone. If there are two animals, the enclosure must be markedly larger, with hides at both ends, and the animals must be watched closely.

As substrate use 8-10 cm of loose, slightly damp soil mixed with sand that the animal can dig in. Lay a layer of leaves or dry grass over it, and provide a low, flat hide and a hide under the leaf litter where the animal can lie undisturbed. A flat stone under the heat lamp keeps the claws worn. Never use a heat rock with a built-in heating element. The enclosure must be ventilated from the top, free of draughts and securely closed, because the skink is a skilled escape artist.

On warm summer days the animal can be outside in an escape-proof enclosure with sun, shade and a dry, rain-proof hide. The fence must go at least 50 cm into the ground and 80 cm up, and the top is covered with netting against predators.

TEMPERATURE

Give the animal a temperature gradient from 22-26 °C at the cool end to 28-32 °C at the warm end. The surface of the basking spot must be 35-45 °C, and the animal must be able to choose how warm it wants to lie. Measure the surface temperature with an infrared thermometer and the air temperature with digital thermometers at both ends.

The heat comes from a halogen spot or a heat lamp with broad radiation above the mesh, and all heating is controlled by a thermostat. At night 15-22 °C is suitable, and a night-time drop is healthy. If the enclosure has to be heated at night, use a heater without light.

The cool resting period in winter is part of the species' cycle. Provide a layer of leaves or dry grass under a rain-proof hide at one end, where the animal can lie undisturbed, and lower the temperature and day length gradually. Only healthy, fully grown animals may rest, and they must be examined first.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

The species comes from dry to semi-arid regions and must not have high humidity. 30-50 % is suitable, measured at the cool end. The substrate must be slightly damp deeper down, but never wet. A hide with slightly damp moss helps with shedding. If shed remains often stay on the toes and tail, the humidity in the hide must go up.

Water is provided in a shallow, wide and stable dish that cannot tip over. Change the water every day, because the animal often uses the dish as a toilet. Place the dish at the cool end, so the water does not evaporate quickly.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species is diurnal and needs both UVB and strong light. Use a T5 tube with UVB above the mesh, and position it so that the UV index at the basking spot is 3-4 (Ferguson zone 3). The light must be on for 8-10 hours a day, and the tube is replaced about every sixth month, because the output declines even though the light looks unchanged. There must be no glass or plastic between the lamp and the animal.

UVB allows the skink to produce vitamin D in the skin and absorb calcium from the food. Supplement with a bright LED light, and preferably give the animal direct sun in the outdoor enclosure when the weather is warm. The animal must always be able to go into shade.

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

FEEDING

Tiliqua occipitalis is omnivorous, and the food must be varied as much as possible. Greens are, for example, dandelions, hibiscus flowers, daisies, cabbage and grated courgette, and fruit is given in smaller amounts, both soft and hard. Animal protein is large insects such as crickets and cockroaches, snails, earthworms, small mice and lean, raw meat. Fish, fatty meat and large amounts of fruit must be avoided.

Dust the food regularly with calcium and a vitamin supplement. Snails may only be given from places where slug pellets have never been laid, and preferably from your own breeding.

Adults are fed about once a week and young animals every third or fourth day. Feed in the morning, so the skink can digest during the warmest hours of the day. Adults easily become overweight if the proportion of protein is too high, so keep it below half of the food.

Read more: Feeder animals: keeping and breeding

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

The skink is shy for the first few days, but settles in and tolerates calm handling. Lift it with the whole body supported, so the feet have something to stand on, never hold it belly up, and never grab the head or tail. Use short handling sessions, and let the animal come to you at its own pace. Wash your hands afterwards.

The body language is clear. An open mouth with the tongue stuck out, hissing and a flattened body are a warning, and the animal should then be left in peace.

The animal must live alone, and new animals must be quarantined for at least a month before they come near other animals.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The sexes are hard to tell apart externally. Size, head shape and tail length overlap a lot, and the most reliable signs are young in the female and hemipenes in the male. Probing and everting the hemipenes can injure the animal and should be left to a vet. The age at sexual maturity is not documented for the species; in *Tiliqua scincoides* it is about one and a half to three years. Females should be fully grown and in good condition before they are used for breeding.

MATING

Mating probably takes place in spring after a cool resting period, when the days become longer and warmer. The male pursues the female and grips her with his mouth, so mating is rough, and the female may get bite marks. Therefore keep the animals apart all year, and bring them together only in the mating season under supervision. Separate them if the male bites persistently.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The species is live-bearing. The young are born late in summer or early in autumn, and the female has at most one litter a year. Litters are typically of about five young. The young eat the foetal membranes right after birth.

Give the pregnant female plenty of food and calcium and a warm basking spot. If she becomes lethargic, stops eating or strains without result, contact the vet.

INCUBATION

There are no eggs to incubate. Gestation probably lasts 90-120 days, as in *Tiliqua scincoides*. The female must have the same temperatures as usual, and the basking spot must not be removed, because the warmth drives embryonic development. Keep her alone in the enclosure.

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are independent immediately after birth and disperse after a few days in the wild. They have yellow and brown bands over the body and tail. They must live separately in a smaller enclosure with a basking spot, UVB, a humid hide and the same furnishings as the adults. Feed them every third or fourth day with small insects, earthworms and finely grated greens, dusted with calcium. Heat and UVB are essential for healthy growth.

Health and common mistakes

Most problems are caused by husbandry. The typical ones are:

- Metabolic bone disease from a lack of calcium, vitamin D or UVB. It causes soft jaws and crooked legs.
- Shedding difficulties with shed remains on the toes and tail, especially with too low humidity in the hide.
- Mites and ticks. Mites are seen as small, black dots on white paper and can multiply quickly and kill the animal, so they must be controlled immediately. Ticks often sit in the ears or under the scales and are removed with tweezers.
- Obesity from too much protein and too little movement. Weigh the animal regularly; sudden weight loss is a warning sign.
- Poisoning from snails that have eaten slug pellets.
- Internal worms and other parasites, especially in wild-caught animals. New animals must be quarantined.

Seek a vet with experience in reptiles if the animal loses weight, stops eating, breathes with its mouth open or seems listless.

Read more: Common diseases and signs of illness Read more: Buying animals: captive-bred, wild-caught and transport

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.