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SKINKS

Common Blue-tongued Skink

Tiliqua scincoides

A sturdy, heavily built skink from Australia and eastern Indonesia with a broad, bright blue tongue that it displays when it feels threatened. *Tiliqua scincoides* is diurnal, omnivorous and calm, reaches 45-60 cm in length and can live for about 20 years. It needs a large enclosure, UVB and a warm basking spot.

Family: Scincidae Former name: *Lacerta scincoides*

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**45-60 cm** total length incl. tail
Weight	**400-600 g**
Lifespan	**15-20 years**
Active	**By day**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial**
Habitat	**Savanna and temperate woodland and meadow**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**180 × 60 × 60 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**21-33 °C**
Basking spot	**35-45 °C**
Temperature, night	**18-24 °C**
Humidity	**40-60%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Recommended** Ferguson zone 3
Diet	**Insects, fruit, plants and worms/snails**
Kept	**Singly**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Live-bearing**
Sexually mature	**18-36 months**
Litter size	**6-15 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 scincoides has a heavy, tubular body, short legs and a triangular head. The scales are smooth and overlapping, and they contain small bony plates that give a solid armour. The tongue is broad and bright blue and stands in sharp contrast to the pink mouth lining. When threatened, the animal turns towards the danger, opens its mouth wide and sticks out its tongue, and if that does not help, it hisses and flattens its body to look larger.

The species was described in 1790 and is one of the first skinks to be given a scientific name. The name probably alludes to *Scincus*, a North African skink, and the ending -oides, which means "resembling". There are three subspecies: *T. s. scincoides* in southern and eastern Australia, *T. s. intermedia* in northern Australia and *T. s. chimaerea* on the Tanimbar and Babar Islands in Indonesia. The eastern form is silver-grey with broad dark brown crossbands and a dark stripe behind the eye. The northern form lacks the stripe, has yellow or orange blotches on the sides and is the largest and heaviest.

Adults reach 45-60 cm in length, of which head and body make up just over half, and typically weigh 400-600 g. The northern subspecies is the most common in the trade. It has been bred in captivity for many generations and is therefore tame. Animals from Indonesia may be wild-caught. There are also a number of colour and pattern forms in captivity, but the guide here deals with the species.

The tail can be shed if handled roughly, especially in young animals, and only grows back incompletely. A bite from an adult skink hurts and can cause bruising, but the animal has no venom.

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

Distribution and habitat

Tiliqua scincoides is found across large parts of northern, eastern and south-eastern Australia. *T. s. scincoides* lives in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and south-eastern South Australia. *T. s. intermedia* lives in northern Australia, from the Kimberley in Western Australia across the Northern Territory to Queensland. The type locality for the northern form is Yirrkala in the Northern Territory.

The subspecies *T. s. chimaerea* lives on the Tanimbar and Babar Islands in the province of Maluku in Indonesia. The type locality is Saumlaki on Tanimbar.

> **Native range:** Australia and Indonesia.

HABITAT

The species lives in open country with plenty of cover: grass tussocks, scrub, open woodland and heath, and it also thrives in large suburban gardens. At night the animal lies in leaf litter or under stones and logs. In the morning it emerges and basks before seeking food in the warmer hours of the day. Active animals maintain a body temperature of about 30-35 °C.

In cold periods the animal lies inactive and buried in its hide and only emerges on sunny days. The species quickly gets used to humans, and in gardens snails and caterpillars are easily available food. It is this seasonal rhythm, with a cooler winter half-year and a warm, bright summer, that is imitated in the enclosure.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An adult animal needs an enclosure of at least 180 × 60 × 60 cm (length × width × height), corresponding to just over 1 m² of floor area. Larger is better, for example 180 × 120 × 90 cm. The floor is more important than the height, because the animal lives on the ground, but with lamps inside the enclosure the height must be at least 60 cm. Young animals can happily live in an adult enclosure when there are many hides.

The animal must be kept alone. Both males and females are territorial, and even young animals can bite each other seriously.

As substrate use 10-15 cm of loose soil that the animal can dig in, for example a mixture of 60 % unfertilised topsoil and 40 % play sand. Avoid shavings of pine and cedar, which are harmful to health. Bark tubes, pieces of wood and boxes provide hides at both ends of the enclosure, and a slate or tile slab keeps the claws worn. Place a flat stone under the heat lamp, but never use a heat rock with a built-in heating element, because it can burn the animal.

The enclosure must be well ventilated, free of draughts and securely closed.

TEMPERATURE

The animal must be able to choose between 21-26 °C at the cool end and 28-33 °C at the warm end. The surface of the basking spot must be 35-45 °C. Measure the surface temperature with an infrared thermometer and the air temperature with digital thermometers at both ends.

Use halogen spots or a heat lamp with broad radiation in a ceramic fitting, mounted above mesh, and put a thermostat on all heating equipment. At night 18-24 °C is suitable, and a night-time drop is healthy. If the room becomes colder, use a ceramic heater or a heating panel without light, never a glowing bulb. Cold nights without sufficient warmth by day can trigger hibernation or illness.

Read more: Heat and temperature Read more: Brumation and the seasons

HUMIDITY AND WATER

The Australian subspecies need a humidity of 40-60 %, measured at the cool end. The Indonesian *T. s. chimaerea* needs 60-80 %. A wet substrate is not necessary, but a hide with damp sphagnum, where the humidity approaches 100 %, helps with shedding. The hide must be in the cool half, and the moss changed often so it does not go mouldy. If the belly scales are rough, the air is too dry. If they are smooth and the animal sheds without problems, the humidity is right.

A large, shallow water dish with no more than 7-8 cm of water must always be available. The water is changed every day, because the animal often uses the dish as a toilet. Clean the dish with an animal-safe disinfectant once a week.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation Read more: Quarantine and hygiene

LIGHTING AND UVB

The species is diurnal and needs both UVB and strong light. Use a T5 tube with UVB, and position it so that the UV index at the basking spot is about 3-4 (Ferguson zone 3). There must be no glass or plastic between the lamp and the animal, and mesh can remove a large part of the radiation. The animal must not be able to get closer to the lamp than about 25 cm. Replace the tubes every 6-12 months, because the UVB output declines even though the light looks unchanged.

UVB allows the animal to produce vitamin D in the skin. The species can live and breed for years without UVB if the food contains D3, but the vitamin D level in the blood is lower, so UVB is the best solution. Supplement with ordinary daylight from an LED of about 6,400 K. The light is on for 12 hours a day, preferably slightly shorter in winter. A couple of hours in direct sun is good when the animal is supervised in a closed enclosure with shade and hides.

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

FEEDING

Tiliqua scincoides is omnivorous. The staple is a mixture of greens, animal protein and a little fruit. Juveniles under 12 months need 70-80 % protein, adults about 50-60 %. Adults need 40-50 % vegetables and leaves, and fruit at most 10 %. Too much protein causes obesity in adults and in extreme cases can burden the kidneys.

Protein can be crickets, locusts, cockroaches, black soldier fly larvae, snails, earthworms and silkworms as well as eggs and lean meat. Superworms, whole fish and thawed pinkie mice are given only as treats. Greens are, for example, dandelion leaves, kale, endive, pak choi, courgette, pumpkin and carrot, finely grated. Avoid avocado, onion, aubergine, citrus fruits, rhubarb and poisonous flowers such as tulips and daffodils. The feeder insects must be fed well for 1-3 days before feeding and dusted with calcium.

Juveniles are fed every day, subadults about 3 times a week and adults 1-2 times a week. A portion is about the size of the animal's head. Adults get calcium on the food 2-3 times a week. Commercial reptile food already contains calcium and vitamins, and an extra multivitamin on top can cause overdose. Good-quality wet dog food can be included in small amounts, but not as the main food. Feed in the morning, so digestion takes place during the warmest hours of the day.

Read more: Feeder animals: keeping and breeding

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Tiliqua scincoides is calm, and captive-bred animals often become very tame. Wild-caught animals are more easily stressed and more defensive. A skink is tamed by speaking calmly to it and letting it come to you at its own pace. When you lift it, the whole body including the tail must rest on your forearm, and one hand must be visible. Never grab the tail, and avoid touching the top of the head. Begin with 5 minutes of handling a day, and increase slowly. Wash your hands after handling.

The body language is clear. Short snorts mean irritation, and waving the tail means irritation or anger. Long hisses and an inflated, angled body are aggression, and an open mouth with the tongue out is a warning. The animal should then be left in peace. A calm skink walks relaxed and flicks its tongue. An uneasy skink moves in short bursts with long pauses.

Each skink must live alone. When it gets cold and the days become short, the animal can go into hibernation and lie almost motionless for several weeks without eating. Only healthy animals over 12 months may hibernate, and they should be examined by a vet first.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

In captivity the animals become sexually mature after about one and a half years, in the wild only at around three years of age. The size at sexual maturity varies from population to population, and females should be fully grown and in good condition before they are used for breeding. The sexes are hard to tell apart externally: size, head shape, pelvic width and tail length overlap a lot. Probing and everting the hemipenes can injure the animal. The most reliable method is X-ray at the vet after contrast fluid has been injected into the hemipenal pockets. An animal is certainly a male when hemipenes are seen, and certainly a female when it gives birth to young.

MATING

In the wild the animals mate from August to November. The males pursue the females and fight each other. Mating is rough, and the female may get bite marks. Therefore the animals are kept apart all year and brought together only in the mating season under supervision. The female must be healthy and in good condition. A cooler period in winter, followed by longer and warmer days, sets mating in motion. Separate the animals if the male bites persistently.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The species is live-bearing. The female gives birth three to four months after mating, in the wild from December to February, and can have young every year if she has enough food. Most litters are about 10 young, but litters range from 1 to 25, and large females have the largest litters. The embryos develop in the female's oviduct with a well-developed placenta.

Birth most often takes place by day, when the female is warm, and takes from one and a half to eight hours. The young can manage on their own immediately 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 lasts about 90-120 days, but it is not precisely known. 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. After birth the young eat the foetal membranes, and that is normal.

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are about 9-14 cm long and weigh 8-20 g. They shed for the first time within a few days and disperse quickly in the wild. They must live separately with a basking spot, UVB, a humid hide and the same furnishings as the adults. Feed every day with 70-80 % protein: small crickets, earthworms, eggs and finely grated greens, and dust with calcium. With plenty of food they grow quickly and can reach almost adult size in a year. The clear colours and the glossy surface come when the animals are 8-9 months old.

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, where shed remains stay on the toes and tail, especially with low humidity. Provide a humid hide and a lukewarm bath.
- Skin infections and respiratory infections if the substrate is constantly wet or the temperature is too low.
- Dental problems, especially if a lot of fruit is given.
- Obesity and fatty liver from too much protein and too little movement. Weigh the animal regularly; sudden weight loss is a warning sign.
- Parasites. Ticks and internal worms are common in wild-caught animals, and new animals should be quarantined for 3-6 months.
- Impacted hemipenal pockets, gout and birthing problems in females.

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

Read more: Common diseases and signs of illness

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.