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SKINKS

Blanchard's Helmet Skink

Tribolonotus blanchardi

Tribolonotus blanchardi is a very small skink from the forests of the Solomon Islands and Bougainville. It measures only 3-4 cm from snout to vent, lives hidden in the damp leaf litter along small forest streams and lays one egg at a time. Little is known about the species and its care.

Family: Scincidae

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**3-4 cm** snout-vent length
Lifespan	**10 years**
Active	**By day and at dusk**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial and burrowing**
Habitat	**Rainforest and montane forest**
Difficulty	**Experienced**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**45 × 30 × 30 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**24-26 °C**
Temperature, night	**20-22 °C**
Humidity	**80-90%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Recommended** Ferguson zone 1
Diet	**Insects and small invertebrates (springtails, fruit flies)**
Kept	**Singly or in pairs**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Clutch size	**1 eggs**
Incubation	**65-85 days** at 23-27 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Not listed**
EU annex	**Not listed**
IUCN	**Least Concern (LC)**

About the species

Tribolonotus blanchardi belongs to the genus *Tribolonotus*, whose species have keeled, often pointed scales and an angular, helmet-like head. It is one of the smallest species in the genus: adults measure no more than about 4 cm from snout to vent, and females on average a little over 3 cm. The total length including the tail is not documented, so the size in the specification box is the snout-vent length. Colours and markings are not described in detail.

The species was described in 1930 by Charles Burt from an animal from Choiseul and is named after the American biologist Frank Nelson Blanchard (1888-1937).

Like the other species of the genus it is shy and spends most of its time under cover in the leaf litter or down in the substrate. The species is hardly ever kept in captivity, so its care is based on its closest relatives, especially *Tribolonotus gracilis*.

Distribution and habitat

Tribolonotus blanchardi lives only in the Solomon Islands archipelago: on Choiseul, Guadalcanal and the Nggela Islands, which belong to the state of Solomon Islands, and on Bougainville, which belongs to Papua New Guinea. The type locality is Choiseul. The whole range covers about 8,500 km².

Native range: Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.

HABITAT

Tribolonotus blanchardi lives in humid tropical forest. It is found from about 100 m up to 1,000-1,500 m, in both lowland forest and mountain forest. It lives in the leaf litter and burrows in the substrate, preferably along small forest streams, where it hides under stones, fallen trunks and leaves. The diet is insects.

The climate is warm and very humid all year, but cooler in the mountains, especially at night. The species is diurnal, but lives so hidden that it is rarely seen.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Little is known about the care of *Tribolonotus blanchardi*. It lives in humid forest in the Solomon Islands, in the leaf litter along forest streams, and has the same requirements as *Tribolonotus gracilis* and *Tribolonotus novaeguineae*, which are far better known in captivity. The figures in the specification box are borrowed from *Tribolonotus gracilis* and adjusted for the smaller size.

A single animal needs a terrarium of at least 45 × 30 × 30 cm, and a pair needs more space. Plenty of hides mean the animals show themselves more often, and a front-opening terrarium is calmer than one that is opened from above.

The substrate is the most important thing. Use a moisture-retaining, earthy substrate of topsoil and coconut fibre in a layer of 5-10 cm with a thick layer of fallen leaves on top. A drainage layer of clay balls at the bottom and long-fibre sphagnum above it keep the substrate evenly damp without turning sour. Remove faeces daily, and replace the substrate completely every 3-4 months.

Furnish with several hides, for example coconut shells, cork tubes and cork bark, so the animal can choose for itself where to be. Non-toxic plants and branches give extra cover. The terrarium must have good ventilation, so the surface can dry out a little between mistings.

Read more: Terrarium construction and bioactive substrate

TEMPERATURE

Tribolonotus blanchardi does not use basking spots. Keep 24-26 °C by day without a basking spot and 20-22 °C at night. The night may be slightly cooler than for *Tribolonotus gracilis*, because the species also lives in mountain forest. Room temperature is often enough, and a weak heat source above a hide at one end can help if the room is cool. Avoid heat bulbs that dry the terrarium out, and never let the substrate become hot and dry. Measure the temperature in the hide with a digital probe.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Tribolonotus blanchardi tolerates drying out very badly. The humidity must be high, 80-90 %, and the substrate must always be damp. Mist morning and evening, or use an automatic rain system. Ensure good ventilation, so the air does not become stagnant and musty. Use distilled or reverse osmosis water in any fogger.

Provide a small, shallow dish of clean water, partly sunk into the substrate, so the animal can drink and bathe. Change the water daily and scrub the dish every week.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

Tribolonotus blanchardi lives hidden in the leaf litter in shaded forest. A weak UVB light for forest species that live in shade (Ferguson zone 1), with a UV index of 1-2 at the highest point under the lamp, is recommended as for *Tribolonotus gracilis*. There must be plenty of shade and cover, so the animal can choose for itself. Keep the light on for about 12 hours a day, so that day and night are kept distinct, and use white light.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

Tribolonotus blanchardi eats insects. Offer small prey: small crickets, fruit flies, springtails, small cockroaches and small earthworms. Prey must be no wider than the distance between the animal's eyes, and an animal of 3-4 cm needs very small feeders. Adults are fed every other day. Dust the insects with calcium and vitamin D3. A dish of fresh water must always be available.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Tribolonotus blanchardi is shy and spends most of its time hidden. It is an animal to watch and not for handling. Give a new animal at least two weeks in peace. In *Tribolonotus gracilis* the males are aggressive towards each other, so the animals are kept singly or as a pair in a spacious terrarium, never two males together.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Sex differences and age at sexual maturity are not documented for *Tribolonotus blanchardi*. In *Tribolonotus gracilis* the male is recognised by a patch of enlarged ventral scales and pores under the toes of the hind feet; whether this also applies to this species is not known.

MATING

Mating is not documented for *Tribolonotus blanchardi*. In *Tribolonotus gracilis* mating can be encouraged all year round with frequent misting and higher humidity. A pair needs plenty of hides, so the animals can keep away from each other.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The female of *Tribolonotus blanchardi* lays one egg at a time. The number of eggs per year is not documented. In *Tribolonotus gracilis* the egg is buried just below the surface in a hide, and the female stays with it. Provide a hollow in the substrate under a hide, filled with slightly damp sphagnum and topsoil and covered with cork bark.

INCUBATION

Incubation is not documented for *Tribolonotus blanchardi*. The figures in the specification box are borrowed from *Tribolonotus gracilis*, where the egg hatches after 65-85 days at 23-27 °C. Place the egg half-buried in damp sphagnum in a lightly ventilated container without turning it. The moss must be damp, but not wet.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

Rearing is not documented for *Tribolonotus blanchardi*. In *Tribolonotus gracilis* the young look for food and cover a few hours after hatching. Give them a small terrarium with damp kitchen paper or moss, a coconut shell as a hide and a very shallow water dish, and offer the smallest prey daily, dusted with calcium and D3.

Health and common mistakes

Diseases in *Tribolonotus blanchardi* have not been described. In the species of the genus these are the typical problems:

- Parasites and bacterial infections in wild-caught animals. Quarantine new animals singly, and have a vet examine a faecal sample.
- Dehydration. Dull eyes and a limp body are signs of illness or too little moisture.
- Metabolic bone disease from too little calcium and vitamin D3.
- Lost tail from fright or handling.

See a vet experienced with reptiles if the animal loses weight, does not eat or lies sluggishly.

Read more: Quarantine and hygiene 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.