herpy

SKINKS

Giant Spiny Skink

Tribolonotus ponceleti

Tribolonotus ponceleti is a rare, secretive skink from the islands of the Solomon archipelago and the largest species in its genus. It has keeled, spiny scales and an angular, armoured head, lives on the forest floor and burrows, and it can make sounds. Its care is based on the climate and on the close relatives *Tribolonotus gracilis* and *Tribolonotus novaeguineae*.

Family: Scincidae

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**11-13 cm** snout-vent length
Lifespan	**10 years**
Active	**At dusk and at night**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial and burrowing**
Habitat	**Rainforest**
Difficulty	**Experienced**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**75 × 45 × 45 cm** L × W × H for 1 adult
Temperature, day	**24-27 °C**
Basking spot	**27-28 °C**
Temperature, night	**22-24 °C**
Humidity	**70-90%**
Water	**Water dish**
UVB	**Recommended** Ferguson zone 1
Diet	**Insects and worms/snails**
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	**Data Deficient (DD)**

About the species

Tribolonotus ponceleti belongs to the genus *Tribolonotus*, compact, sturdily built skinks with keeled, spiny scales on the back and an angular head. The species was described in 1937 by James Roy Kinghorn. The species name honours Father Jean-Baptiste Poncelet (1884-1958), who headed the Catholic mission at Buin on Bougainville and collected animals for a museum in Paris.

It is the largest species in the genus. The body from snout to vent grows to 13 cm, and females measure on average about 11 cm; by comparison, *Tribolonotus gracilis* and *Tribolonotus novaeguineae* reach no more than about 10 cm. The length of the tail, and hence the total length, is not documented, and the weight is not known.

The species is one of the few skinks that can make sounds. It is rare in the wild and is hardly ever kept in captivity. It is an animal to watch and not for handling.

Distribution and habitat

Tribolonotus ponceleti lives on the islands of the Solomon archipelago in the western Pacific. The type locality is Bougainville, which politically belongs to Papua New Guinea, and most known records come from the lowlands at Kunua on the island's north-west side. There are also records from the Shortland Islands, Choiseul and Isabel in the state of Solomon Islands.

Its occurrence on Bougainville has been disputed, because the species was absent from large collections on the island in the 1960s, but there are many museum specimens from there. The islands are mountainous and covered in rainforest. The species is regarded as rare, the size of the population is not known, and on the IUCN Red List it is assessed as data deficient.

> **Native range:** Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.

HABITAT

Tribolonotus ponceleti lives in rainforest, mostly in the lowlands up to about 250 m, but a few records come from higher mountain slopes. It lives in the leaf litter and debris of the forest floor and burrows, and it is active at dusk and at night. The diet is arthropods. The climate is tropical and humid with high temperatures and rain all year. Details of its way of life are not documented, but it is probably similar to that of its relatives: a hidden life in damp leaf litter, under fallen trunks and at the base of dense vegetation.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

Very little is known about the care of *Tribolonotus ponceleti*. The climate in the range is warm and humid all year, and the species lives in the leaf litter of the forest floor. The close relatives *Tribolonotus gracilis* and *Tribolonotus novaeguineae* live in the same kind of rainforest in New Guinea and are well known in captivity; the care figures are borrowed from them.

The species is larger than its relatives, so a single animal needs a terrarium of at least 75 × 45 × 45 cm, and a pair at least 100 × 50 cm of floor space. The floor space matters more than the height, because the species burrows. Use a moisture-retaining, earthy substrate of topsoil mixed with coconut fibre in a layer of 5-10 cm, and place a thick layer of fallen leaves on top. Replace the substrate completely every 3-4 months, and remove faeces daily.

Furnish with plenty of hides, for example coconut shells, cork tubes and curved pieces of cork bark, so the animal can choose for itself. The terrarium must have good ventilation, so it can dry out a little between mistings. A front-opening terrarium is calmer than one that is opened from above.

TEMPERATURE

Keep the terrarium at 24-27 °C at the cool end and 27-28 °C in a warm hide, and let the temperature fall to 22-24 °C at night. The skink is active at dusk and at night and hardly basks, but warms itself in hiding. A warm hide directly under a heat bulb of 50-60 W in a lamp with a ceramic fitting is enough in most homes. If the hide becomes too hot, switch to a weaker bulb. Measure the temperature inside the hide with a digital probe, and preferably use a thermostat.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

The humidity should be 70-80 % by day and higher at night, preferably 80-90 %, and the substrate must always be damp. The species probably tolerates drying out very badly, like its close relatives. Mist the terrarium morning and evening, or use an automatic rain system, and ensure ventilation, so the air does not become stagnant. Provide a dish of clean water, partly sunk into the substrate, for both drinking and bathing. Change the water daily.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

The animal is active at dusk and at night, and its need for UVB is not documented. In the close relatives the animals can manage without UVB when the food is supplemented with calcium and vitamin D3, but a weak UVB light is recommended. Use a tube for forest species that live in shade (Ferguson zone 1), and let it cover half the length of the terrarium with plenty of shade underneath. The UV index should be 1-2 at the highest point. Keep the light on for 12 hours a day, so that day and night are kept distinct.

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

FEEDING

In the wild the species eats arthropods. The staple diet can be crickets, cockroaches, mealworms, silkworms, black soldier fly larvae, earthworms and snails. Variety is important, and earthworms usually bring a hidden animal out. Young animals are fed every day, adults every other day, and prey must be no more than half the size of the animal's head. Dust the insects with calcium at every feeding and with vitamin D3 and a multivitamin at every other one. A dish of fresh water must always be available.

Read more: Feeder animals: keeping and breeding

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Tribolonotus ponceleti is an animal to watch and not for handling. Skinks in the genus play dead, try to flee, drop their tails or make sounds when seized, and this stresses them. Give a new animal at least two weeks in peace. Animals of the same sex can be aggressive towards each other, so a single skink or a pair is safest. The animal is mostly seen at dawn, at dusk and at feeding.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Age and size at sexual maturity are not documented for *Tribolonotus ponceleti*. In the close relatives it takes about 3-4 years, and sex can be determined by the male's rectangular patch of enlarged ventral scales at the navel and the grey, raised pores under the toes of the hind feet. Whether the same applies to *T. ponceleti* is not documented.

MATING

Mating is not documented for the species. In the relatives a healthy adult pair is put together in a spacious terrarium with plenty of hides, and the breeding season follows the rainy season. The humidity is raised to 85-90 % by misting several times a day, and the temperature is kept at 23-27 °C. The pair often shares a hide, and the female defends her egg.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The species is egg-laying and lays one egg at a time. The number of clutches per year is not documented. In the relatives the female curls around the egg in the hide and defends it. Offer a nest of slightly damp peat moss and topsoil under a hide, covered with cork bark.

INCUBATION

The incubation period is not documented for *Tribolonotus ponceleti*; in *T. gracilis* the egg hatches after 65-85 days at 23-27 °C. The egg hatches best in an incubator, half-buried in damp peat moss in a lightly ventilated container, without being turned. The moss must be damp, but not soaking wet, and the egg sweats if it is dead.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

The hatchling measures about 5 cm from snout to vent at hatching. Rearing is not described for the species. In the relatives the young can be reared in a small terrarium with damp kitchen paper or moss, a coconut shell as a hide and a shallow water dish. They are fed every day with small crickets and other live prey, dusted with calcium and vitamin D3 at every other feeding.

Health and common mistakes

There is no information on diseases in *Tribolonotus ponceleti*. The following are the typical problems in the genus:

- Parasites in newly acquired, wild-caught animals. Quarantine new animals singly, and have a vet examine a faecal sample as soon as possible.
- Bacterial infections that can kill several animals within a few days, especially in wild-caught animals after transport and cold.
- 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.

A healthy animal is alert, has clear, shiny eyes and no wounds or deformities. 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.