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SKINKS

False Poncelet's Helmet Skink

Tribolonotus pseudoponceleti

Tribolonotus pseudoponceleti is a small, secretive skink from Bougainville and Buka in the northern Solomon Islands. It has keeled, rough scales and a triangular head, and lives under rotting logs, usually in pairs. Its care is almost undescribed and is therefore based on the species' way of life in the wild and on the close relatives *Tribolonotus gracilis* and *Tribolonotus novaeguineae*.

Family: Scincidae

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**4-7 cm** snout-vent length
Lifespan	**10 years**
Active	**At dusk and at night**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial**
Habitat	**Rainforest**
Difficulty	**Experienced**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**60 × 40 × 30 cm** L × W × H for 2 adults
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	**Least Concern (LC)**

About the species

Tribolonotus pseudoponceleti belongs to the genus *Tribolonotus*, compact skinks with keeled scales and an angular head. The species was described in 1968 by Allen Greer and Fred Parker on the basis of more than 600 collected animals. The species name refers to its resemblance to *Tribolonotus ponceleti*; "pseudo" is Greek for "false".

It is much smaller than *T. ponceleti*: the snout-vent length is 26-73 mm, whereas *T. ponceleti* reaches 116-125 mm. The tail makes up 59-65 % of the total length, so the largest animals measure about 18-20 cm in all. The head is deep and triangular seen from above, and the striated head scales, the keeled scales on the back and tail and the enlarged scales on the flanks and legs give the animal a rough appearance. It is distinguished from *Tribolonotus gracilis* and *Tribolonotus novaeguineae* by the dorsal scales lacking the very large spines and by the casque on the back of the head not rising above the nape. In preservative the animals are brown above and pale yellowish brown below; some have pale marbling and one or two pale chevrons at the base of the tail. Animals from Buka are generally paler than those from Bougainville. Weight is not documented.

Lifespan is not documented for the species. *T. gracilis* lives at least 10 years in captivity. The species lays eggs, is rare in the trade and is an animal for observing, not for handling.

Distribution and habitat

Tribolonotus pseudoponceleti lives on Bougainville and the small island of Buka just to the north, in the northern part of the Solomon Islands. Politically the islands belong to Papua New Guinea. The type locality is Kunua on the west coast of Bougainville. The species occurs from the coastal plains up to about 1200 metres altitude, but most often in the lowlands. It is absent from the Buin Plain in southern Bougainville and is found only in the mountains from about 600 metres altitude. It has also not been found on the Shortland Islands south of Bougainville, where the large *Tribolonotus ponceleti* lives. On the IUCN Red List the species is assessed as least concern.

> **Native range:** Papua New Guinea.

HABITAT

Tribolonotus pseudoponceleti is terrestrial and very secretive. It lives in and under rotting logs and in fallen leaf litter in both primary and secondary forest, is common in swampy areas and is also found in newly cleared gardens. It prefers humid but not sodden conditions; in the mountains it lives on the sharp ridges, where the ground is drier and warmer than in the shady ravines. It does not dig itself, but moves through insect tunnels and cavities in and under the logs and often has soil between its scales. It never ventures into the open and has not been found active at night. Most often a male and a female are found together under the same log, sometimes with another pair or a pair of half-grown animals nearby. The climate is tropical and humid with high temperatures and rain all year.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

The care of *Tribolonotus pseudoponceleti* is almost undescribed. The species lives in a warm, humid climate and hides under rotting logs. The close relatives *Tribolonotus gracilis* and *Tribolonotus novaeguineae* live in the same kind of forest and are well known in captivity; the care figures are borrowed from them and adjusted for the species' smaller size.

A pair needs an enclosure of at least 60 × 40 × 30 cm, and bigger is better. Floor area matters more than height, because the species lives right at ground level. Use a moisture-retaining, earthy substrate of topsoil mixed with coconut fibre in a layer 5-10 cm deep, and lay a thick layer of fallen leaves on top. Half-rotted pieces of wood and cork bark lying directly on the substrate imitate the species' natural hides. Remove faeces daily, and replace the substrate completely every 3-4 months.

Furnish with many hides, e.g. coconut shells, cork tubes and curved pieces of cork bark, so the animals can choose for themselves. The enclosure needs good ventilation, so that it can dry out a little between mistings. A front-opening enclosure is calmer than one that opens from the top.

TEMPERATURE

By day the temperature should be 24-27 °C at the cool end and 27-28 °C in a warm hide, and at night 22-24 °C. The species does not show itself in the open and does not bask, but warms up under logs and bark. A warm hide directly under a 25-40 W bulb in a lamp with a ceramic socket is enough in most homes; if the hide becomes too hot, change the bulb for a weaker one. Measure the temperature inside the hide with a digital probe, and preferably use a thermostat. The temperature must not exceed 30 °C.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

Humidity should be 70-80 % by day and 80-90 % at night, and the substrate must always be moist, but not sodden; the species prefers damp, but not waterlogged places. Mist the enclosure morning and evening, or use an automatic rain system, and provide ventilation so that the air does not become stagnant. Provide a shallow dish of clean water, partly sunk into the substrate, and change the water daily.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

The need for UVB is not documented. The close relatives can manage without UVB when the food is dusted 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 enclosure with plenty of shade beneath. 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

The species eats small arthropods, in captivity also termites. The staple diet can be small crickets, cockroaches, mealworms, silkworms, black soldier fly larvae, earthworms and small snails. Variety is important. Young animals are fed every day, adults every other day, and the prey must be no more than half the size of the animal's head. The species comes out to eat when the light is dim or it is dark, so food is best given in the evening. Dust the insects with calcium at every feeding and with vitamin D3 and a multivitamin at every second. A dish of fresh water must always be available.

Read more: Feeder animals: keeping and breeding

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

Tribolonotus pseudoponceleti is an animal for observing and not for handling. If uncovered, it presses itself flat against the ground and stays there or crawls slowly away; it rarely tries to flee. It has sharp eyesight and notices movement in a dimly lit room at several metres' distance. In the wild it most often lives in pairs, so a male and a female can be kept together. Whether several animals of the same sex can be kept together is not documented, so a single skink or a pair is the safest. Give a new animal at least two weeks in peace. The animals are seen mostly in dim light and at feeding.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

The age at sexual maturity is not documented for *Tribolonotus pseudoponceleti*; in *Tribolonotus gracilis* it is about 3-4 years. Females can breed from a snout-vent length of about 44 mm, and gravid females measure 44-58 mm. The sexes are told apart by the pores under the feet: adult males have 2-4 pores in an arc at the front of the palm and 3-10 pores in two rows under the hind foot. Females never have pores in the palm, and only some have pores under the hind foot, and then fewer and less distinct. Both sexes have a pair of glands on the belly, slightly smaller in the female.

MATING

Mating is not documented for the species. Since the male and female live together under the same log in the wild, a healthy adult pair can stay together all year. In the relatives the breeding season follows the rainy season and can be triggered by raising the humidity to 85-90 % with frequent misting and keeping the temperature at 23-27 °C. The pair often share a hide and defend the nest.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The species lays eggs, and the female lays only one elongated, leathery-shelled egg at a time. Only the right oviduct functions, and a new egg can mature shortly before or just after the previous one is laid. The number of eggs per year is not documented; in *Tribolonotus gracilis* up to six eggs are laid over a breeding season at intervals of about six weeks. Offer a nest of slightly moist peat moss and topsoil in a hollow under a hide, covered with cork bark.

INCUBATION

The incubation period is not documented for the species. The embryo has hardly begun to develop when the egg is laid, and in *Tribolonotus gracilis* it hatches after 65-85 days at 23-27 °C. The egg hatches best in an incubator, half buried in moist peat moss in a lightly ventilated container, without being turned. The moss must be moist, but not sodden, and water is added only to the moss, never to the egg.

Read more: Incubating eggs

REARING THE YOUNG

Rearing is not described for the species. In the relatives the hatchlings can be raised in a small enclosure with damp kitchen paper or moss, a coconut shell as a hide and a shallow water dish. They are fed every day with very small crickets and other live prey, dusted with calcium and vitamin D3 at every second feeding.

Health and common mistakes

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

- Parasites in newly acquired, wild-caught animals. Quarantine new animals individually, and have a faecal sample examined by a vet as soon as possible.

- Bacterial infections, especially in wild-caught animals after transport and chilling.
- Dehydration. Dull eyes and a limp body are signs of illness or too little humidity.
- Metabolic bone disease from too little calcium and vitamin D3.
- Lost tail after a fright or handling.

Wild-caught animals in the genus can die suddenly, even after several years in captivity. A healthy animal is alert, has clear, bright eyes and no sores or deformities. Consult a vet with experience of reptiles if the animal loses weight, does not eat or lies lethargic.

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.