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Helmethead gecko

Tarentola chazaliae

A small, compact gecko from the Atlantic coast of north-western Africa with long, pointed bumps at the back of the head that look like a helmet. It is nocturnal, fearless and greedy, chirps and grunts when it is on the go, and lives in dry terrain with damp fog from the sea. It therefore needs a dry enclosure with humid hides and daily misting.

Family: Phyllodactylidae Former name: *Geckonia chazaliae* Published 15 November 2026

KEY FACTS

THE ANIMAL

Adult size	**5-10 cm** total length incl. tail
Lifespan	**8-12 years**
Active	**At night**
Lifestyle	**Terrestrial**
Habitat	**Desert**
Difficulty	**Intermediate**

CARE

Min. enclosure	**50 × 30 × 30 cm** L × W × H for 2 adults
Temperature, day	**24-29 °C**
Basking spot	**32-35 °C**
Temperature, night	**18-22 °C**
Humidity	**40-60%**
UVB	**Optional**
Diet	**Insects**
Kept	**Singly, in pairs or one male with several females**

BREEDING

Reproduction	**Egg-laying**
Clutch size	**2 eggs**
Incubation	**70-110 days** at 27-30 °C

PROTECTION AND PAPERWORK

CITES	**Appendix II**
EU annex	**Annex B**
IUCN	**Vulnerable (VU)**

About the species

In *Tarentola chazaliae* the head is covered with small granules and has long, pointed bumps at the back, so that it looks like a helmet. The body is short and stocky with rough scales, which along the relatively short tail become small spines. The colour is grey, brown or orange. Some animals are uniform in colour, others have irregular light or dark spots.

It is a small gecko. Adult females reach 8-10 cm including the tail, while the males are clearly smaller, down to about 5 cm. The male is also recognised by a bulge at the base of the tail. Animals from the inland valleys can be considerably larger than the coastal animals.

F. Mocquard described the species in 1895 as *Geckonia chazaliae* from an animal from Cap Blanc in Mauritania. The name comes from the yacht *Chazalie*, which belonged to the French naturalist Raymond de Dalmas, who collected the animal, and which ran aground off Cap Blanc. Genetic studies have since shown that the species belongs to the genus *Tarentola*, but many keepers still know it as *Geckonia*.

The gecko is fearless and curious. It chirps, grunts and croaks and waves its tail, and it has a great personality. The IUCN assesses it as Vulnerable (VU), and it is still collected for the pet trade. It was once common in the trade, but today it is harder to get hold of, and it can be difficult to get it to breed. The lifespan is not documented for the species. The 8-12 years in the

fact box is borrowed from the larger *T. mauritanica* and should be taken with reservation.

Distribution and habitat

The species is found only along the Atlantic coast of north-western Africa, from the area around Agadir in southern Morocco through Western Sahara and Mauritania to Senegal. About three quarters of the range lies in Morocco. The type locality is Cap Blanc at Nouadhibou in Mauritania.

The range is a long, narrow coastal strip, but the species has also been found at Sidi Ahmed Laaroussi near Smara in Western Sahara, 144 km from the sea. The map shows the area in broad terms.

> **Native range:** Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania and Senegal.

HABITAT

The gecko lives in dry, stony desert areas and on sandy ground close to the sea. By day it lies under stones or debris on the ground, where it is a little cooler and damper. At night it is active with round, wide-open pupils and stays mostly on the ground.

Almost no rain falls, but dense fog drifts in from the Atlantic and is the most important source of moisture. The species is therefore not a desert gecko in the usual sense: it lives in damp coastal air over dry ground. The wind from the sea can be sharply cold. In Morocco in 1993 many animals were found under black plastic bags lying fixed to the ground, which acted as small solar collectors. There are no measurements of the temperature in the species' retreats, so the care advice is based on experience from captivity.

Care

THE ENCLOSURE

An enclosure of about 50 × 30 × 30 cm (length × width × height) is enough for two or three adults. 45 × 45 × 45 cm and 40 × 40 × 20 cm are also used, and more space brings more activity, because the animals explore diligently. The gecko is not good at climbing smooth surfaces and stays mostly on the ground, but it can get up the glass, so the lid must always fit securely.

As substrate sand is most used, but clay, coconut fibre and paper have also worked, and newly hatched young are kept on kitchen roll. Sand causes no problems when the animals are healthy, the temperature is right and the substrate is cleaned regularly. Provide many hides: cork bark, upturned plant saucers, slate and low roots, and at least one, preferably two, humid hides with damp moss. Heavy items must stand directly on the bottom of the enclosure and not on the sand, so they cannot slip and crush an animal.

TEMPERATURE

By day it should be 24-29 °C with a warm spot of 32-35 °C. Use a heat mat under the floor at one end or a small spot lamp, always with a thermostat, so that a warm end of about 29-32 °C and a cool end of 24-27 °C result. At night the temperature should fall a few degrees. There are no figures, so the 18-22 °C in the fact box is an estimate based on the species' cool coastal climate. Measure with a digital thermometer at both ends.

Breeding animals usually get a cooler period in winter, but there is no fixed practice for temperature and length. Keep the rest mild with a temperature a couple of degrees lower, shorter days and less food, and leave the water available.

Read more: Heat and temperature

HUMIDITY AND WATER

The species differs from most desert geckos in needing moisture, and moisture is the key to success. The humidity can be 40-60%, but the animals do best when you mist lightly once or twice daily. In addition, give the cool end a thorough misting about once a week, so the lower layers of sand retain a little moisture.

Ventilation must be good enough that the enclosure dries out within a couple of hours, because the animals must not live in constant dampness. There must always be a humid hide with damp moss and a shallow dish of fresh water.

Read more: Humidity, misting and ventilation

LIGHTING AND UVB

The gecko is nocturnal and requires no special lighting. The light can be anything from a spot bulb with UV or a daylight tube to ordinary daylight from the room. The species can be bred entirely without UV, but UV may benefit the young in particular. The animals bask when the light gives them the right warmth, and UV in the cool months may give a better breeding season.

UVB is therefore optional. If you use it, provide shade and hides, so the animals can withdraw. Keep the light on for about 12 hours a day, and keep the enclosure dark at night.

Read more: Lighting and UVB

FEEDING

The gecko is an eager and greedy hunter, which eats surprisingly much for its size. The staple diet is dubia roaches or crickets, and small mealworms and waxworms can be given for variety. The insects must not be longer than the distance between the animal's eyes, that is, about 3 mm for newly hatched young and about 6 mm for half-grown and adult animals. Give them in a dish with high sides, so they do not escape and hide.

Dust the insects at every feed with calcium with D3 or a combined calcium and vitamin supplement. Breeding females must be fed often and have extra calcium, otherwise they may develop health problems. There are no fixed figures for how often adults should be fed, so adjust according to the animal's condition, and watch that the tail is plump.

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

BEHAVIOUR AND HANDLING

The gecko is hardly afraid of humans at all. Many animals quickly learn that you mean food, and come to the glass or take insects from tweezers or fingers. Newly hatched young have eaten from a finger five minutes after they crawled out of the egg. Careful handling is tolerated well, but the animals are small and must be treated with care.

Little or no aggression has been seen in groups, but males should not be put together. A male can be kept with one or more females, and the species also does well alone. Mating can be violent: a male has died after the female bit him on the hemipenis, and the wound became inflamed. Watch new pairs, therefore, and have an extra enclosure ready.

Breeding

SEXUAL MATURITY AND SEXING

Males are recognised by the bulge at the base of the tail and are smaller than females. When the species becomes sexually mature, and how much a female should weigh before breeding, is not known, so the fact box has no figure. Wait until the females are fully grown and in good condition, because the eggs drain the calcium reserves.

MATING

A cool winter rest is recommended to get the animals breeding, but temperature and duration are not described for the species (see temperature). Females can lay eggs at regular intervals without a male being present, but the eggs are then unfertilised. When the male is introduced, watch the first few days, and separate the animals if the female attacks him.

EGG-LAYING AND CLUTCHES

The females lay two eggs at a time and are diligent egg-layers. How many clutches there are per year is not known for the species. In *T. mauritanica* a female in an enclosure can lay four to six clutches a year, and the eggs are hard-shelled, almost round and 11-12 × 9-10 mm.

Tarentola females readily lay the eggs in a corner or at the foot of a stone and cover them with sand, so provide a deeper layer of sand somewhere in the enclosure. The eggs can be carefully removed and placed in an incubator.

Read more: Incubating eggs

INCUBATION

There are no incubation data for the species, so the figures in the fact box are borrowed from two relatives. *Tarentola mauritanica* hatches after 70-75 days at 27-30 °C. Eggs of *T. nicolauensis* from Cape Verde hatched at a constant 31 °C after about 82 days and at a constant 27 °C after about 112 days, and they lay dry all the way through. Use 27-30 °C as a starting point, and expect 70-110 days, longest at low temperature. Since the species lives in a cooler climate than both relatives, it is sensible not to go above 30 °C.

Hard-shelled gecko eggs do not tolerate a wet substrate, so place them in a box with dry or only slightly damp vermiculite, and do not turn them. In *Tarentola mauritanica* the sex of the young depends on the temperature, but whether this applies to this species is not known. Losses of several eggs late in development and of a couple of young just after hatching have been seen, until changes to the incubation produced viable young.

REARING THE YOUNG

The young are small but robust, and grow quickly. Keep them on kitchen roll for the first few weeks, so you can see whether they eat and pass droppings, and give them a humid hide. Feed with insects of about 3 mm dusted with calcium with D3.

The first shed is the greatest challenge: some young shed perfectly, others have difficulty, so the humid hide is important. The young are generally more demanding than the adults. There are no figures for size at hatching or for growth.

Health and common mistakes

Adults are hardy, but the species has a reputation for being difficult, especially because of mortality among newly hatched young and problems with the food. The typical problems are:

- Desiccation. Mist daily, and provide humid hides and fresh water, but avoid constant dampness and poor ventilation.
- Mortality among newly hatched young, which is probably linked to the incubation and the food. Use small insects and humid hides.
- Problems with the first shed in young.
- Calcium deficiency in breeding females. Provide plenty of calcium with D3 and food.
- Injuries during mating, where the female attacks the male.
- Animals crushed by heavy items standing on the sand. Place everything directly on the bottom.

A healthy animal is lively and greedy at night and has a plump tail. Seek a vet with experience in reptiles if the gecko loses weight, does not eat for several weeks or seems limp.

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.