

## Introduction to Blue Tongued Skinks

The blue-tongued skink is a mild mannered lizard which is native to the semi-desert and open woodland regions of Australia, New Guinea and Tasmania. They are becoming more popular, as they are very social pets with loads of personality and great dispositions. Blue tongued skinks can live for fifteen to twenty years and can reach lengths of up to 27 inches.

### Housing:

Blue tongued skinks are not good climbers, therefore horizontal space is required. Ideally a 55 gallon aquarium is good, although the larger the better. Skinks should be housed alone, as they tend to fight with each other. The enclosure should have a sturdy mesh top for ventilation.

Regular cleaning of the cage is very important. Uneaten food should be removed daily. The cage should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected at least once a week. The cage can be cleaned with a mild soap solution and then disinfected with a solution of 1 capful of bleach to one gallon of water. Your local pet stores should also carry a cleaning solution appropriate for reptiles. Betadine, nolvasan and roccal are other commercial products that are available for disinfecting. Make sure to rinse the cage well and dry it thoroughly before returning the skink to its cage.

Skinks do not need elaborate furniture or props, but they do like to hide. There should be a hiding place on both ends of the enclosure. Large slabs of rounded cork bark make excellent hiding areas. They also like cylindrical hiding areas, such as PVC pipes. A few rocks, plants or logs are good, but do not clutter the cage, as they enjoy moving around more than climbing over things.

### Bedding:

Several types of bedding are available. Two recommended materials are paper (newspaper or butcher paper) and reptile carpeting. These products are easily obtained, clean, safe, and inexpensive. Although corncob, wood shavings, reptile bark, sand and gravel are commonly used as bedding material WE DO NOT RECOMMEND THEM. They are associated with multiple health problems. These products can be eaten by your reptile and result in an impaction that requires surgery to remove. Also, bacteria and fungi are able to grow in these substrates and dust from them can irritate the eyes and respiratory system of your reptile. Shavings, corncob, sand, and gravel are also difficult to keep clean.

### Lighting:

A UVA/UVB light should be used ten to twelve hours per day all year long. Blue tongued skinks that do not get the amount of UV light they need lose bone density and become susceptible to multiple fractures (similar to osteoporosis in humans).

Natural sunlight, when available, is the preferred source. Windows and aquariums filter out much of the beneficial sunlight. Placing the cage or aquarium with a screen top by an opened window or a SAFE place outside for a portion of the day is one option during warm weather (at least 75-80 degrees). Your skink should always have a shaded area to go to if he chooses. Giving your skink warm and cool areas in his enclosure allows him to regulate his body temperature

effectively on his own. This is crucial for all reptiles, as they cannot regulate their own body temperature.

An ultraviolet light that emits both UVA and UVB should be used year round. These bulbs will stop emitting the necessary UV rays long before the bulb itself burns out. Change the UV bulbs at least every six months to be sure your skink is getting the rays it needs. UV light is invisible! Your bulb may still emit visible light but not produce any UV light. Date your bulbs and change them every six months even if they are still emitting visible light. Note that fluorescent UV lights do not produce heat and must be used in addition to a heat source. Any lights should be placed where your skink cannot climb on or come in contact with them.

#### Heat:

Proper temperature for skink should range from 75 degrees on the cool side to 88 degrees on the warm side. The basking area should range from 90-95 degrees. Thermometers should be on both sides of the tank to help monitor the temperature closely.

#### Diet:

Blue tongued skinks are omnivores, they can eat a wide variety of proteins and vegetables. Young skinks should have half of their diet from insects, whereas adults should have more vegetables and plant material. Skinks should be fed every other day. After they are done eating, all uneaten food should be removed from the enclosure.

Produce should be fresh, high quality and fit for human consumption. Make sure it is pesticide free as well. Chopped fresh greens and mixed vegetables should compose approximately 45-60% of an adult skink's diet. Dark leafy greens such as mustard, kale, dandelion and collard greens should make up the bulk of the vegetable mix, as they are an excellent source of calcium. Peas, green beans, corn, squash, carrots, sweet potato, cucumber, zucchini, green peppers and parsley can also be added. Adult skinks prefer their salad coarsely chopped, while juveniles prefer finely chopped greens.

Fruit should make up no more than 5-10% of the diet. Melons, berries, apple, peaches, pears, grapes and plum may also be chopped and added to the mix as an occasional treat. Flowers, such as hibiscus, dandelions and nasturtiums may also be used as occasional treats. You should always avoid avocado, eggplant, rhubarb and high sodium foods.

Protein should be at least 50% of the diet for young skinks. Protein sources include crickets, mealworms, kingworms, snails and pinky mice. Wax worms should only be offered as an occasional treat, as they are higher in fat. If your skink is not eating well, please talk with your veterinarian about other protein sources that are safe. Once your skink has been offered a variety of foods, try to rotate the menu so your skink does not get bored. They prefer a variety of different foods.

Your skink should have fresh water available at all times. The dish should be shallow and sturdy so it will not tip over.

#### Supplements:

The crickets you buy should be "gut-loaded" with calcium. Most crickets are sold this way. If your pet store does not "gut load" their crickets for you, purchase an insect food sold for this purpose and follow the directions on the package. (For example, the brand "Gut Load" cricket and insect food by ESU Reptile recommends feeding crickets for 24 hours before offering them to your skink.) The crickets you provide for your skink should be no bigger than the distance between your pet's eyes. Do not feed crickets that are too large to your skink! Remove any crickets that are not eaten within ten minutes. A calcium carbonate supplement (without phosphorus or vitamin D) should be given to your skink twice weekly as well.

#### Handling and restraint:

Any new reptile, including a new blue-tongued skink, should be allowed to acclimate for a few days. It should not be handled until it is comfortable in its new environment. Once your new skink is eating regularly, then handling can begin.

Initial handling sessions should be limited to ten minutes or less per session. This can be done a couple times each day during the acclimation process. Be sure to hold your skink close to the floor or over a bed, sofa, etc., in case he gets nervous. Lift your skink by gently encircling its body near the forelegs with your fingers. Support its body with your free hand. Skinks can be very trusting, but they cannot hold on as well as other lizards, therefore always be careful to support their bodies. Since skinks cannot regulate their body temperature, do not keep them outside of their enclosure for long periods of time. Never grasp your skink by the tail as it can break off and it does not regenerate well.

#### Recommended Exam Schedule

We recommend a yearly physical examination for all adult skinks and twice yearly exams for all juveniles. The signs of poor health in blue tongued skinks can be subtle and if they are not recognized early, it can be too late to successfully treat a problem. Also, it is possible for skinks to get internal parasites and have them for a long period of time before they display any symptoms. Because of this, we recommend a yearly fecal test. We also recommend a yearly blood test to check calcium and phosphorus levels. This will ensure that your skink's dietary needs are being met and will allow us to address any deficiencies before they cause a major problem such as metabolic bone disease.

Blue tongued skinks are quickly becoming popular in the reptile world. They are very friendly and have great personalities. They seem to enjoy attention and can become very attached to their owners. Blue tongued skinks are great for reptile enthusiasts of all levels.