



# Handle with care

## Bearded dragon

**Species:** Inland bearded dragon  
**Scientific name:** *Pogona vitticeps*

### Description

The inland bearded dragon is a heavily-built lizard, tan to brown in colour, with a broad head, stocky body and a thick tail. Its 'beard' is made of spiky, elongated scales that cover its throat pouch. Adult bearded dragons measure 40-60 cm long. They generally live between seven and 12 years in captivity.

### Life in the wild

Bearded dragons are active during the day, living in semi desert and dry open woodland areas of Australia. They live mostly on the ground but climb as well. Their diet in the wild includes: frogs, small lizards, birds, insects, grubs and, occasionally, flowers and soft vegetation.

### Source of animals

Australia no longer allows bearded dragons to be exported for the pet trade, so those available in the UK are captive-bred. A veterinary surgeon, pet shop or reptile-keeping organisation may be able to recommend a specialist breeder. Other species are also being captive-bred and kept as pets, but the inland bearded dragon is still the most commonly kept lizard species.

### Prior knowledge and preparation

Before acquiring a bearded dragon, it is crucial that any potential keeper finds out about the animal – including how to provide for the animal's needs when kept in captivity, how big it gets and how long it lives. Only then can the keeper make an informed decision about whether s/he can provide the specialist care and captive environment required, and has the facilities, time, financial means and long-term commitment to maintain a good standard of care. The keeper can then acquire suitable accommodation, food and the necessary accessories, and prepare the enclosure to ensure the captive environment is stable before taking the animal home. This also gives the novice keeper time to locate and to talk to relevant experienced keepers and professionals for further advice such as a vet with experience of treating the species, and specialist UK organisations that keep this species in captivity.

### Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Bearded dragons need specialist handling and treatment. Your veterinary surgeon will advise on the costs of consultations. Holiday cover may be difficult and expensive to arrange, but your bearded dragon will need to be looked after properly every day you are away, by a reputable boarding establishment or a friend who understands the animal's needs.

### Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

A healthy bearded dragon should be active, bright-eyed, alert and have no deformities or thinning at the base of its tail. There should be no signs of faeces around its vent (excretory opening). If a bearded dragon's ribs or pelvis are sticking out, it could be suffering from a poor diet, dehydration, parasites or some other illness. Patches of skin that remain unshed and attached to the body for several days could be a sign that the lizard's home does not have a high enough humidity.

### Why are bearded dragons vulnerable in captivity?

Bearded dragons are completely dependent upon their owners to provide them with the correct accommodation, heating, lighting and food, all of which must replicate as closely as possible their wild habitat. Without proper care they can suffer from calcium deficiency, dehydration, infections and parasites, and in severe cases or if left untreated, they can eventually die.

### Handling/transporting the animal home

These lizards should be picked up with all four feet supported; they should never be picked up by their tail. They can be transported in large cloth bags with the opening tied up with string, which is then ideally put in a wooden crate lined with polystyrene to provide further insulation and protection from

#### Health issues to find out about

- Metabolic bone disease.
- Dehydration.
- Parasites.
- Burns following contact with heat sources or from inappropriate heating and lighting.

being injured during the journey. Transporting the lizard in a dark and secure environment also helps to reduce any stress to the animal. The crate needs some ventilation, but should be kept out of draughts. Bearded dragons need to be transported at temperatures over 20°C to keep them healthy.

Anyone handling lizards or cleaning their enclosure should wash their hands before and after handling the animals to reduce the risk of picking up and spreading bacteria such as *Salmonella*.

### **Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment**

Bearded dragons are primarily solitary in the wild, but when kept in groups will form a social hierarchy with individuals becoming dominant. It is advisable to keep solitary animals, or small groups of animals of a similar size to avoid the risk of larger animals injuring or killing smaller occupants, or taking all the best food. Groups should comprise only females, or females can be kept in a small group with a single male. Any groupings will need to be monitored to check the group is compatible. More space may be needed or the group may have to be split up if biting occurs resulting in some individuals being repeatedly injured.

Bearded dragons are quite active and the bigger the enclosure is the better. A vivarium should measure at least 150cm long x 50cm wide x 50cm high for two adults. The vivarium should have three sides of waterproofed melamine and a tight-fitting sliding glass front. Good ventilation is essential and a mesh-covered window in the roof of the accommodation is ideal. The provision of sufficient basking and cool areas for each lizard is essential. Temperatures should range from 28°C in the coolest areas up to 40°C for the vivarium's hot spots during the day, but can be allowed to drop to 20°C at night. A heat pad placed under one third or half of the vivarium will help keep the floor of the enclosure warm and dry, as well as provide background heat during the cooler 12-hour night period. An incandescent spot lamp can be used for each basking area, as long as wire mesh guards around the lamp protects the lizards from direct contact. Full spectrum lighting with UVB (ideally of the more intense 5.0 level) is also needed for the lizards' healthy growth and the bulb should be located no more than 30cm from the animal. The bulb needs to be changed as advised by the manufacturer to ensure the required level of UVB lighting is maintained during the appropriate 12-hour daylight period when switched on for 8-12 hours each day. Thermometers should be mounted in the vivarium at the lizards' level in both the hot and cool areas to accurately monitor and therefore maintain the required temperature range. The vivarium should be placed out of direct sunlight and away from hot radiators, as both can affect the temperature inside the enclosure. Draughts should also be avoided.

A clean, shallow dish containing fresh water should be provided at all times and be large enough for both drinking and bathing in the cooler area of the enclosure. A drip system to drop water on to suitable plants is a safer water source for juvenile lizards, as young animals are at risk from drowning even in very shallow water. Such a drip system, in combination with the water bowl for bathing, is also desirable for adult animals as in the wild these lizards would naturally drink from water collected on plants, rather than from standing pools.

The bottom of the vivarium should be lined with newspaper, paper towels or ideally coral sand because it causes no harm if ingested when feeding. Cork logs and well-supported rocks are important for climbing on and burrowing in and can help to wear the lizard's claws down. There should be hides for each lizard in both the cool and hotter areas of the vivarium. Each lizard will need a sturdy branch as despite spending a lot of time on the ground, these animals are also good climbers and can be seen perching atop posts in their natural habitat.

These lizards are omnivores – they eat both insects and plant material. Live invertebrates such as spiders, small locusts, mealworms, waxworms, earthworms, snails and crickets should make up about 50 per cent of an adult's diet. Pinkie mice may be given occasionally. Chopped plants, such as dandelions, spring greens and flowers, should also be supplied and anything that is not eaten must be removed daily. Grated cuttlefish lightly dusted over the food daily for juveniles, and twice a week for adults, is a good source of calcium. Adult bearded dragons will need to be fed four to five times a week; juveniles will need to be fed a varied diet every day but are often more carnivorous than the adults. A vitamin and mineral supplement that is suitable for bearded dragons and does not contain too much vitamin A (as too much in the diet can be fatal) should be provided in a separate dish. When housing a group of lizards together, several feeding sites should be used in the shared vivarium, as these animals live within a social hierarchy and if the food is provided in just one location the dominant animal is liable to take most of the food.

Bearded dragons eat a lot and therefore excrete a lot of waste. Spot cleaning is needed to remove faecal matter as needed, with the glass wiped down every week. The vivarium should also be thoroughly cleaned about once a month. Products are manufactured for cleaning vivariums, but it is still important to thoroughly rinse and dry the vivarium before adding the clean substrate, water bowl etc., and any lizard(s).

### **THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.**

**If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.**