



Handle with care

Leopard gecko

Species: Leopard gecko
Scientific name: *Eublepharis macularius*

Description

Leopard geckos are spotted, hence their name; the adult has a yellow body speckled with brown or black spots and splodges and the tail is banded in black and white. The underside of the body is white. Juveniles are predominantly striped. This species does not have the typical gecko pads on the toes, as it is a ground-dwelling gecko. In addition, it, unusually, has eyelids, which allows it to blink and thereby keep its eyes free of sand and dust. Leopard geckos can grow to a length of 20–25cm as adults and weigh 60–80g. Adult males have a prominent v-shaped row of pre-anal pores on the underside of the body and paired swellings at the base of their tail. Females lack the swellings and their pre-anal pores are barely noticeable. Males also tend to have a broader neck and head than females and the body is usually more robust.

It is common for these geckos to live for 15 years, but living for as long as 40 years in captivity has been reported.

Life in the wild

Leopard geckos are adapted to life in the arid, rocky deserts of eastern Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and north-west India. They are active at night, spending the day hidden under rocks to avoid high temperatures. Their diet consists of a large variety of invertebrates and the occasional small vertebrate.

Source of animals

The leopard gecko is one of the most commonly kept reptiles. Animals now on sale are captive-bred, including several morphs such as the leucistic (pattern-less) leopard gecko.

Prior knowledge and preparation

Before acquiring a leopard gecko, 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 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

Leopard geckos need specialist handling and treatment. Your veterinary surgeon will advise on the costs of consultations. Your gecko will still need to be looked after properly every day when you go on holiday, by either a reputable boarding establishment or a friend who understands its needs.

Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

The leopard gecko should be active, bright-eyed and alert and it should have a reasonable fat reserve round the base of its tail. If its vent has faeces around it, the animal probably has some health problem. A gecko with a protruding pelvis or prominent ribs may be suffering from a poor diet, dehydration, parasites or some illness. Sunken or dull eyes may also be a sign of ill health, but be aware that the eyes of a healthy gecko may appear sunken when it is sleeping. It should move quickly and alertly when disturbed. It should be checked for ticks and mites. Small bits of old skin, seen particularly on toes and tail tips, suggest a problem with shedding, so the humidity in the vivarium where it has been kept may be too low. Soaking in warm water or misting with tepid water may help. If the gecko is thought to be unhealthy a veterinary check must be carried out.

Health issues to find out about

- Incomplete sloughing of skin (dysecdysis)
- Dehydration
- Loss of tail
- Parasites
- Gut impaction
- Skin infections
- Metabolic bone disease

Why are leopard geckos vulnerable in captivity?

Males should not be kept together as they will fight. These geckos are also vulnerable when not provided with the appropriate environment. If the gecko does not have access to a moist refuge, their soft, velvety skin can quickly dry out too much when being shed. The old skin can stick to the new skin and be retained around its digits, with a constriction of the blood flow into the digits causing them to eventually fall off, or in severe cases the animal will die. Leopard geckos will also lose their tail if handled roughly. Despite these lizards often being handled in captivity, excessive handling can cause stress to the animal.

Handling/transporting the animal home

A lizard should never be picked up by its tail, as it is liable to shed it. Instead, place a flat hand quickly but gently on the body of the lizard and grasp it gently by the neck between the thumb and index finger, with the other fingers holding underneath the body of the lizard. Leopard geckos can be transported in a ventilated plastic box with wads of paper in it.

Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

Leopard geckos can be housed alone, but three females and one male or two females and one male can be kept together in a 'harem' as long as they are monitored carefully, particularly when first housed in a group. However, if a harem of geckos is kept, the keeper should also be prepared to provide the appropriate care for any offspring if the animals breed. Males should never be housed together.

A 60cm long x 30cm wide x 40cm high vivarium is suitable for a single gecko; to keep three together, a 90cm long x 30cm wide x 40cm high is the minimum needed. The material used must be waterproof and it must be well ventilated. A melamine or wooden vivarium with a glass front is suitable. However, a top-opening vivarium can provide alternative accommodation that allows for the provision of deeper substrate. Newspaper or sand can be used as a substrate. The sand should be coral or cali sand, as these lizards will ingest their substrate and therefore it needs to be digestible or pass through the animal without causing it any harm. If juvenile geckos are provided with any other type of sand their guts can soon become impacted.

A refuge at both the cool and warm ends of the vivarium should be available for each gecko. The provision of larger, rounded stones or hollow logs will allow the geckos to bury themselves under the stones during the day, as they would naturally do in the wild. If more than one individual is kept, multiple refuges should be available in both the warmer and cooler areas. A rough stone should also be included in the enclosure to provide a slightly abrasive surface to assist the gecko to shed its skin.

A plastic container with vermiculite or a koia/sterilised sand (no lime) mix in it that is misted daily, should provide a moist box for each of the geckos. A low humidity is required elsewhere in the vivarium to reflect the arid environment geckos would have in the wild.

A temperature range of 27–30°C should be provided with a night drop to 21°C. A thermostatically controlled heat pad should be provided under a third to a half of the floor of the enclosure at one end of the vivarium, to allow the geckos to choose between the cooler and warmer areas.

A 12-hour light/12-hour dark cycle is needed, but UV light is not required for this nocturnal lizard. The enclosure should also not be located in direct sunlight or close to any hot radiators.

A varied diet of small- to medium-sized live insects, such as crickets, grasshoppers, waxmoth larvae, springtails and small locusts should be supplied every other day. Ensure they are free from pesticides. A young adult gecko will eat about five to six insects each time. Some live prey should be left in the vivarium for the gecko to catch at will. The prey should be dusted with a vitamin and calcium supplement immediately before being offered to the gecko. It is also important that the insects are 'gut-loaded', i.e. fed on a nutrient rich diet, because these nutrients will then be passed on to the geckos. Pinkie mice can also be given as food every two weeks or so.

Finely grated cuttlefish bone can be provided in a shallow dish or a piece of cuttlefish should be supplied for the gecko to chew on. Water should be supplied at ground level in a shallow dish and replaced every day.

The geckos' dry droppings should be removed every day (a particular corner of the tank is usually selected for defecation), but the vivarium will require a thorough clean once every few months. It should be thoroughly scrubbed and disinfected (using a disinfectant suitable for use in vivariums), then thoroughly rinsed with clean water and dried before the clean substrate, stones and the occupants are returned.

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.