



Handle with care

Blue-tongued skinks - *Tiliqua* species

Species: Common blue-tongued skink and New Guinea blue-tongued skink

Scientific names: *Tiliqua scincoides* and *T. gigas*

Description

Skinks of the *Tiliqua* genus have short, wide toes, and unlike other skinks the fourth toe is not the longest toe. Blue-tongued skinks have broad, triangular heads with smooth scales, long, flat bodies, short legs and a slender pointed about half to two-thirds the length of their body. The common blue-tongued skink is generally a creamy or pale golden tan with about eight narrow, dark cross-bands across the back. Adults will usually grow to about 45–60cm long although some have reached 90cm. The New Guinea blue-tongued skink has a golden to grayish-brown body with 15–20 darker brown cross bands and a pale belly. Its eyes are red and it has a distinctive blue tongue. This skink is usually about 50cm long when fully grown. These skinks can live for more than 10 years in captivity, even as long as 20 years.

Life in the wild

The common blue-tongued skink is native to northern and eastern Australia where it lives in a variety of habitats including moist forests and dry plains. New Guinea blue-tongued skinks live in the scrubland of New Guinea and parts of Indonesia. These skinks live on the ground in leaf litter where they feed on invertebrates, such as snails, and fruit. They are active during the day.

Source of animals

The New Guinea blue-tongued skink is still imported from the wild as well as being offered as captive-bred from specialist keepers, whereas their export from Australia is forbidden. Your local RSPCA animal centre may know of skinks that need rehoming, alternatively, a veterinary surgeon or reputable exotic keeping organisation may be able to advise on suitable breeders in the area.

Prior knowledge and preparation

Before acquiring a skink, 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 organisations that keep this species in captivity in the UK.

Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Your veterinary surgeon will advise on the costs of consultations. Holiday cover may be difficult and expensive to arrange, but your blue-tongued skink will need to be looked after properly every day for the time that you are away by someone who understands their complex needs.

Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

A healthy skink will be active and alert with bright eyes. There should be no sign of diarrhoea around its vent, which can be a sign of dietary problems and/or internal parasites. Cloudy mucus that looks like cottage cheese around the mouth is a clear sign of mouth rot, as is redness or pinpoint haemorrhages on the mucous membranes, which is not common with these skinks but associated with poor husbandry. Fluid or mucus bubbling from the nose may be a sign of a respiratory disease. Its body should be firm and well covered with a thick base to its tail. The lizard should be checked for mites, ticks and internal parasites. Sunken eyes, loose skin and lethargy are all signs that the skink is not well. These lizards are also prone to difficulties when shedding their skin, where it may be necessary to soak the skink and consult with a vet for advice on the removal of any remaining areas of unshed skin.

Health issues to find out about

- Metabolic bone disease – calcium deficiency.
- Mouth rot (stomatitis).
- Internal parasites.
- External parasites.
- Respiratory disease.
- Dietary problems.
- Dehydration.
- Burns from incorrect, or contact with, heating/lighting sources.
- Incomplete shedding of skin.

Why are skinks vulnerable in captivity?

Blue-tongued skinks are completely dependent upon their owners to provide them with the correct accommodation, heating, humidity, lighting and food, all of which must replicate as closely as possible their wild habitat. Without correct care they can suffer with diseases like mouth rot and bone disease, and eventually die. The appropriate diet with sufficient calcium and access to UVB light is important to prevent metabolic bone disease. Adequate ventilation and the correct humidity are also important to stop skinks developing respiratory problems. Blue-tongued skinks are particularly prone to problems when shedding their skins and may need soaking to help skin removal. Their large size also makes them more difficult to keep than other smaller lizards and their heavy jaws can inflict a powerful bite. Their long life span (20 years) can mean a commitment to ownership for which many people are not prepared.

Handling/transporting the animal home

Anyone handling skinks 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*. Skinks have powerful jaws and sharp claws and should be handled carefully. A calm skink can be picked up gently with one hand under its belly, the index and third finger positioned behind its head so its belly lies in the palm of the hand and along the arm. If the skink is less calm, the other hand should be used to hold the base of the tail and the hind legs. A skink can be transported in a cloth bag with the opening secured with tightly tied string or a pull tie. The bag should be placed inside a wooden crate insulated with polystyrene. Smaller skinks can be transported in bags in polystyrene fish boxes. Only a little ventilation is needed and the skinks should be kept out of draughts. The temperature during transportation should be kept above 20°C to avoid future health problems.

Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

Skinks are not social animals and should be housed alone to prevent fighting. One adult blue-tongued skink will need a large vivarium measuring around 150cm long x 90cm wide x 30cm high, and no smaller than 120cm long x 60cm wide x 30cm high. The height of the enclosure is less important as these animals are terrestrial and do not need space for climbing. The enclosure should be glass-fronted with sides made of waterproofed timber or melamine. Ventilation panels, screen mesh in the roof, should be included too. If the roof is removable, instead of having a sliding glass door in the front, this allows access whilst still retaining the deep substrate. Inadequate ventilation can result in growth of fungi and bacteria, making the lizard more susceptible to respiratory disease. The vivarium should be set up a week or more before the skink is moved in and checked regularly to make sure that the temperature and humidity are correct. The enclosure should not be placed close to any hot radiators or in direct sunlight or draughts, as such locations can effect the temperature range within the enclosure.

The floor of the enclosure should be covered with a deep layer of calci or coral sand and wood chips or aspen bedding. These lizards will burrow into the substrate in search of food and shelter. Damp moss (or ideally a moss substitute) should be added in one area to help maintain a humidity gradient across the vivarium. Logs, or PVC pipes that are partially or fully buried into the substrate, should be added for additional hiding places in both the warm and cold areas to provide refuges for the lizard, especially important during the night period when they are not active. Some large flat rocks are then added to provide basking sites that are warmed by the heat lamp.

Adult blue-tongued skinks need a living environment with low to moderate humidity and a daytime temperature of 25–30°C falling to 18–20°C at night. Young animals will need temperatures 2–3°C higher than adults. A reptile radiator placed at one end of the vivarium is ideal to provide the warmer end of the enclosure during night and day. A basking area of 35°C should also be provided using a heat lamp (which has a protective mesh guard to prevent the skink from having any direct contact with the heat source) during the day period. UV lighting is also required as it is essential for calcium metabolism. The UVB source should be located within 15–25cm of the basking animal (without any glass or plastic between the UV or full-spectrum lamp and the animal). The UV bulb should be changed according to the lamp instructions, but usually every six months to maintain the UV source. All lights and the heat lamp should be switched off at night for a dark and cooler period.

Very young hairless mice (often called ‘pinkies’) and invertebrates like crickets, locusts, waxworms and mealworms should all be on a blue-tongued skink’s menu. Slugs and snails, if chemical free, can also be offered. Good quality low fat cat or dog food can be given, but only if finely grated fruit and vegetables are added too, such as apple, pear, melon, mangos, peas and courgettes. Flowers like dandelions, roses and carnations should also be offered. Skinks younger than six months need feeding every day, then every two to three days. Plant food should be washed to remove any insecticides or herbicides. Calcium and vitamin supplements should be given to adults once or twice a week; young skinks need these supplements every day. Additional nutrients can be provided by ‘gut-loading’ the insects where they have been fed on nutritious food prior to being given to the skinks. A constant supply of drinking water should be provided in a small bowl, with it cleaned and the water replaced every day. Once a month, the vivarium and its contents will also need to be cleaned, using a mild detergent suitable for reptiles and then rinsed before adding clean substrate and returning the hides, water bowl and the skink.

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.