



Blue-tongue skink CARE SHEET



Blue-tongue skinks, *Tiliqua* sp., are found in tropical forests of Australia, Indonesia and New Guinea. Their biology is the same in captivity as in the wild, so the captive environment should reflect the natural habitat as much as possible to meet their complex welfare needs. These include the need for a suitable environment, a healthy diet; to be housed with, or apart from others; to allow normal behaviour and to be protected from harm. This is a basic guide, so do your own research before getting a blue-tongue skink.

Biology

Blue-tongue skinks are forest floor dwelling lizards with large, smooth, flat scales; a wide head and a bright blue tongue. These lizards can grow to around 50 to 60cm in length and can live for longer than 10 years. They are omnivores and will eat a very wide range of foods including plant matter and live insects. In the wild, they will also eat carrion and any mammals, reptiles, birds or amphibians they can find, though snails are their main food source and should be included in captivity.

Before acquiring a blue tongue skink (BTS) you must be sure that you are able to provide the correct care and associated costs for its whole life. There are many species and subspecies available so you must be sure to have correctly identified the species you keep. Some are farmed in their native range but you should only obtain a skink bred in captivity in this country. Or you can look for a skink in need of a home from the RSPCA:

www.rspca.org.uk/findapet

ENVIRONMENT

The vivarium must be secure to prevent escape and free from hazards. A minimum 120cm long by 60cm high by 60 cm deep vivarium made from a solid, sealed material is advised for a single BTS. Good ventilation is essential to reduce the risk of bacterial build-up and infections. The vivarium should be placed in a safe location away from drafts, heat and direct sunlight to avoid temperature changes.

Temperature

Reptiles are 'ectothermic' meaning they use their environment to warm up and cool down, so you need to create a 'thermogradient'. This means positioning the heat source at one end of the vivarium, leaving the other end cooler, so the reptile can move around to regulate its body temperature.

Create a 'basking zone' for your skink - the warmest area in the vivarium. Use a suitable wattage halogen heat lamp or ceramic (non-light emitting) heater, pointing downwards. Heat lamps must be guarded to prevent burns, or injuries in case the bulb shatters.

A thermostat must be used with all heat sources. This is a simple device that measures the temperature and prevents the vivarium overheating, via a probe placed above the substrate. Adjust the thermostat temperature and check with a digital thermometer that the basking zone is between 30 to 32°C, up to 35°C for younger skinks. The cool end should measure 22 to 25°C. The temperature should only drop to 20 to 22°C at night so you may need to fit a ceramic heater with a thermostat.

LIFESPAN

10 to 20+ years
in captivity

SIZE

Average of 50-60cm

TEMPERATURE

Basking zone: 30-35°C
Cool end: 22-26°C

HUMIDITY

30-45% depending
on the species

BLUE-TONGUE SKINK CARE SHEET

Thermostats are not always accurate so it is essential to check the maximum and minimum temperatures daily. Place the probe of one digital thermometer at the cool end and another at the basking zone.

Skinks are diurnal (awake during the day) and like to bask half covered with substrate. They may also spend time out in the open, especially in the morning. Your skink will benefit from a wide stone placed in the basking zone. Choose a stone around 30cm across to provide a secure platform but do not allow the skink's back to get closer than 25cms from the heat source.

Humidity

A hygrometer should be purchased to measure the humidity at the cool end, which should normally be around 40 to 45% for *Tiliqua gigas*. Australian species, on the other hand, such as *Tiliqua scincoides*, need drier environments so always be sure to check your species' humidity requirements. You can boost humidity by spraying the enclosure with clean water. If it is too high, the vivarium will need more ventilation.

Light

Reptiles use natural daylight to set their day and night patterns. The blue-tongue skink has fairly thick skin that offers it some protection from the sun in the wild, so we need to provide an adequate source of light including ultraviolet (UV). Blue-tongue skinks can see part of UV light, called UVA, essential for their colour vision. Another very important part is UVB, which allows the lizard to make vitamin D₃. This allows the lizard to store and use calcium, an essential mineral.

UV energy cannot pass through glass, so placing the enclosure near a window will do nothing but increase the overheating risk. A reptile UVB lamp must be used inside the vivarium alongside the basking lamp. In a vivarium of 60cms high, a 6% UVB tube, around half the length of the vivarium should be used. The UV lamp should be attached to the roof of the vivarium with the correct length reflector.

Light and shade need to be provided to allow the animal to self-regulate, so make sure the tube is in the hot side. This will leave the cool end more shaded. UVB output decreases over time, so the UV lamp should be changed according to the instructions - usually annually.

Turn off all lights at night to simulate night-time; a 10-hour light/14-hour dark, or 12-hour light/12-hour dark cycle is needed to keep your skink healthy. This can be controlled using a simple plug-in timer.

Cleaning

Poorly maintained enclosures can become dirty quickly and create a health risk for you and your pet. BTS droppings are quite wet and will be made up from faecal waste (the dark part) and urates (the white part). Waste should be 'spot cleaned' as soon as it appears. The vivarium should be completely cleaned with a reptile-safe disinfectant once a month. Carefully wipe the walls, glass and decoration. Reptiles can carry *Salmonella*, so wash your hands before and after cleaning or handling to prevent the spread of infection.

DIET

Water

Water is essential to the health and wellbeing of the blue-tongue skink. A large, shallow dish should be provided at all times with clean, fresh water placed in the cool end. Some skinks will drink standing water but if not, you should lightly spray the vivarium with water every day or every other day, depending on the humidity, to allow the skink to collect droplets of water to drink as they do in the wild. Replace the water every day and if your skink goes to the toilet in the bowl.

Feeding

It is essential to provide a varied diet of appropriately-sized live insects, such as crickets, 'calciworms', 'waxmoth larvae', fruit beetle grubs, dubia cockroaches, silkworms and locusts every day. Remove uneaten crickets or locusts as they can bite the skink.

You need to research the safe plants and vegetables to feed and provide these at all times. Avoid feeding too much spinach as this prevents calcium absorption. Also avoid too much kale as this can affect hormone production. Remove uneaten green food every day and replace with fresh.

It is vital that the feeder insects are 'gut-loaded' with safe vegetables and hydrated well for their own welfare and so that the nutrients are passed onto the skink.

BLUE-TONGUE SKINK CARE SHEET

The captive environment does not supply all of the vitamins and minerals available in the wild so you need to dust the food lightly with supplement powders. Ask your reptile vet for help with this. Vitamins or minerals can be overdosed so always follow the instructions. For example, with a well set UV system you do not need to provide high dietary D₃ levels.

Live or canned snails can be purchased from reptile shops. These greatly enrich the diet and behaviour of the skink so are strongly recommended. Do not feed snails directly from outside, because they can contain pesticides or parasites. Cracked quail eggs are also accepted by blue-tongue skinks and help provide essential calcium and vitamin A as part of a varied diet.

Blue-tongue skinks can easily suffer with obesity in captivity. This can be due to a high protein diet and restricted exercise. It is a good idea to weigh your skink once a month. Young skinks grow very quickly and will benefit from a little and often approach to feeding.

BEHAVIOUR

Enrichment

It is important to provide opportunities for natural behaviour in captivity, called 'enrichment'. Provide stones and branches for climbing. Appropriately sized hides or caves are essential for skinks to feel secure and should be placed in both hot and cool ends of the vivarium. Also provide a moist hide to create an area of higher humidity by filling a hide with moss that is kept damp by spraying with clean water.

Substrate

Substrate is the name for the floor covering in your vivarium. It is important as it permits natural behaviours.



Bringing your lizard home

Set up the vivarium and run it for a minimum of one week prior to introducing your skink. This will allow time for any faults to develop and be fixed and for you to learn how to maintain the system before the animal arrives. On the first day, carefully allow the skink to climb into the vivarium. Leave your new pet with some food and water but with no further interaction until the following day. It is best not to do lots of handling for the first week; instead, allow the skink to explore in its own time.

You need to use a thick layer of substrate - about 4 inches - as blue-tongue skinks like to burrow. You can use a mixture of coco bark and coconut coir and could add some sand for the Australian species. Always use reptile-safe sand such as clean children's play sand rather than builders' sand, which has sharp edges.

Do not use unnatural or indigestible substrates such as 'calci-sand', beech chips, corn cob granules or crushed walnut shells. They are dangerous because they can clog the digestive tract and cause a blockage in a condition called 'impaction'.

COMPANY

It is advised that you keep skinks separately due to their territorial nature. When housed together, they can bite each other's feet or even kill each other.

Handling

Blue-tongue skinks can tolerate human interaction and handling after settling in. They do have a fairly strong bite and need time to get used to you. Never grab them as this can cause stress. The skink should be gently scooped up with both hands so all four legs are supported. If your skink backs away from you or opens its mouth to display its tongue, it is better to wait for another time. Reptiles should not be removed from the vivarium for so long that their core temperature drops. Around ten to fifteen minutes is a safe period for this, depending on the temperature outside of the vivarium. Blue-tongues have quite sharp nails so take care that they do not get them stuck in carpet or clothing.

BLUE-TONGUE SKINK CARE SHEET

HEALTH & WELFARE

A healthy skink should have smooth, glossy scales, a straight jaw and a thick base of the tail, as this is where essential fats are stored. You will need to register with a reptile vet so your skink has access to check-ups and treatment as required.

Shedding

Skinks shed their skin in large pieces. There is no rule as to how often this will happen but young, growing skinks shed their skin more frequently.

Your skink's skin may appear dull when it is about to shed. The skin should then come away easily, ideally over a day or so. If this is not the case, try bathing the skink in tepid water, which can help soften the skin. Poor shedding is usually due to low humidity. Consult your vet if your skink constantly has issues shedding.

Brumation

It is quite common for blue-tongue skinks to slow down in the harsher UK colder months, which is called 'brumation'. It is triggered by the reduction in room temperatures and natural daylight hours. They will reduce the amount that they eat whilst increasing the time spent sleeping. For a healthy skink, brumation is not of concern but seek the advice of your reptile vet if your skink suddenly stops eating rather than over a long period, or is losing a lot of weight.



Transport

If you need to transport your skink, it is important that it is done safely. Choose a suitable sized carrier; young lizards such as hatchlings can be transported in ventilated plastic containers with soft, absorbent paper. Adults can be transported in a well-ventilated plastic tub to prevent injury. This should be kept warm; the addition of a heat pack may be required but make sure this will not over-heat. Keep transit time to a minimum to reduce stress.

Diseases & concerns

It is vital for skinks to have a varied, well thought-out diet and that the heating and lighting systems are tested to be working well at all times. Look for signs of abnormal droppings: constipation or diarrhoea; or weight loss, which can be due to internal parasites. If you have any concerns, have your vet run a parasite test on a fresh sample of droppings. If the skink is spending long periods of time sitting in the water it may be an indicator of a skin condition or mites.

One of the most common problems for captive reptiles is metabolic bone disease, 'MBD', a term used to describe a range of nutritional diseases. However, it is most often due to a lack of UVb lighting, resulting in vitamin D₃ deficiency, preventing reptiles absorbing calcium from their food. This can cause muscle weakness and softening of the bones. The blue-tongue skink will show signs of nutritional deficiency quite quickly, as a wave or dipping of the spine, followed by changes to the shape of the jaw.

Vitamin A deficiency commonly shows with puss around the eyes and jaw area.

It is essential that you take the time to research further before obtaining a reptile. If you do get a skink, monitor its health and behaviour daily and see your reptile vet immediately if you have ANY of the above concerns.

This care sheet is a basic guide only. Further information must be sought before you decide to take responsibility for any exotic pet. Find more information on our website:

www.rspca.org.uk/exoticpets