

EASTERN BLUE TONGUE (TILIQUA SCINCOIDES)

Blue tongue lizards are native to Australia and New Guinea and will live happily in your back yard and are helpful by eating snails and other pests in the garden. They will eat canned cat food (not fish varieties), soft fruits, tomatoes, apples, mushrooms, chopped green vegetables, dandelion flowers and various insects as well as thawed frozen mixed vegetables, mince meat and thawed frozen pinkie mice. They will also lap water from a shallow dish and like a hollow log or similar hide box to hide in.

They can be aggressive if provoked. If you must handle a wild animal, hold it firmly but gently behind the head.

The patterns and colours vary a lot but consist mainly of dark and pale cross-bands. There are six or seven blackish-brown bands on the neck and body and these sometimes branch or end at the midline of the back. The dark bands are usually orange-brown, yellowish or pale grey on the sides. The pale bands are yellowish-brown, greyish-brown or grey and there are six to eight dark bands on the tail. There is an indistinct darker patch on the side of the head.

Ticks are common on wild animals and can usually be seen around the head and armpits. They can be removed with tweezers but always remove the tick's head.

Blue tongues can suffer from colds which can develop into pneumonia. Treatment involves keeping the lizard warm (around 25 to 30 degrees C). Symptoms are a runny nose, eyes, sneezing, lethargy and wheezing. Seeking veterinary treatment is wise.

The preferred temperature is around 25 to 28 degrees Celsius and most animals will not feed if the temperature drops to below 20 as they cannot digest their food.

This species grow to around 60 cm in length. They are ground dwellers so don't need branches to climb on, even though they are quite good climbers and excellent escape artists.

The water bowl should be large enough for the animal/s to bathe in and should be freshened regularly as blue tongues often defecate in their water bowl.

Blue tongues make excellent pets as they tame easily and can be handled by small children. Always wash hands thoroughly both before and after handling.

Tiliqua Scincoides is one of the largest members of the skink family. If kept indoors, the enclosure should have adequate floor space for the lizard to move around freely. Enclosures should be at least 1.2 metres (4 foot) long by 35 cm (14 inches) wide and between 12 (30 cm) and 18 (45 cm) inches high. Two to four animals could be kept in an enclosure this size. The enclosure will need a reasonably tight fitting lid to ensure it is escape proof. Newspaper makes the most convenient substrate as it is easily replaced. Blue tongues tend to be messy. These lizards also require UVB light and a heat source when kept indoors.

If housed outdoors, blue tongues can be kept in a converted aviary or a pit constructed of solid, smooth material with the walls braced on the outside only if it is to have an

open top. Galvanised iron makes good walls as blue tongues can climb brick or concrete walls.

It has been claimed by several noted herpetologist over the years that heating a reptile during winter and keeping it active all year round could be detrimental to its health. If one considers that it is natural for most reptiles to hibernate during winter, then they should be allowed to do so in captivity. There are however, exceptions to this rule. Reptiles that originate from tropical areas where there is little difference between summer and winter temperatures should be maintained at or near their natural temperatures. If the winter temperature in the area in which the animal is maintained is considerably lower than that which it would find in its natural habitat, then the enclosure should be heated to the normal winter temperature of the reptile.

In nature, blue tongues require large amounts of vitamin D for their survival. It is especially essential in their growth patters and for bone development. Most vitamin D is obtained from direct sunlight (or UVB tubes if housed indoors). Placing the enclosure near a window WILL NOT help the animal. UV light does not penetrate glass. If an additional heat source is used in an indoor enclosure then it is wise to also install a thermostat to ensure that the temperature does not get too hot. A vitamin D (calcium) supplement should also be added to the animal's diet.

Please note that although meal worms make a tasty treat, they should not be offered to juvenile animals as the outer casque is rather hard and can cause internal damage. Mealworms are also not suitable as a staple diet for large lizards as huge quantities would be required to maintain even one animal.

It is important to also remember that in the wild, reptiles are "opportunistic" feeders and will eat all they can find at one feeding session. In captivity they will tend to eat all that is provided to them and could become obese and sluggish which eventually will cause health problems. If an animal seems to be putting on too much weight then food should be withheld for several days to allow it to absorb what it has already eaten.

Most reptiles will hide while they digest their food and reappear when they are hungry again, to go in search of more food. Use this as a guide to your feeding regime and observe the amount the animal consumes over several feedings to gauge the correct amount of food to offer. Vary the diet with each meal and experiment with different foods to see what your animal prefers. We find that strawberries, snails and mushrooms are particular favourites.

Blue tongues usually have litters of between 5 and 25 live young that are born in summer. Mating behaviour often sees the male bite the top of the female's head and neck prior to actually mating. This biting can result in permanent scarring.