

Leopard geckos are interesting, pretty, wonderful lizards to keep, as long as the keeper knows some basic facts about what they need in order to stay healthy and happy.



Origin & relatives

Leopard geckos are native to Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as parts of India and Iran. They are found in arid country with rocky crevices in which to retreat.

This species, *Eublepharis macularius*, is a member of the worldwide lizard family Gekkonidae. Leopard geckos have moveable eyelids and do not have the toe pads that enable some geckos to climb smooth surfaces. They are active at night.

Description & color morphs

These geckos grow to between 8 and 11 inches in length. They have thick tails that store fat reserves. Healthy leopard geckos have fleshy tails that widen out before tapering at the end. Additionally, the tail is adapted so that it can break off fairly easily. This is helpful if a predator in the wild grabs the lizard's tail. A portion of the tail breaks off and the lizard escapes. There is little bleeding and healing occurs quickly. The gecko is able to grow a new tail, though it never quite looks the same as the original.

The eyes have clearly visible eyelids, and additionally, the eye is covered by a thin, clear membrane.

Leopard gecko skin is very soft and is covered with bumps. Periodically, the leopard gecko will shed its outer skin, which separates in loose patches. The gecko eats its shed skin, a habit that helps conserve and re-use nutrients.

The leopard gecko has fairly short legs, and each of the toes ends in a small claw, enabling it to hold on to rocks or branches. As noted earlier, leopard geckos

cannot climb smooth vertical surfaces.

Breeders can produce a wide variety of colors and patterns, such as bright tangerine colors, varying amounts of black, faded patterns, or snow-white. More unusual color forms are more expensive.

Diet & feeding issues

Leopard geckos eat live prey such as crickets and mealworms; they do not eat vegetables. The crickets or mealworms should be fed a nutritious diet such as carrots, leafy greens (kale or collards), and mixed grains about a half-day before being fed to geckos (this is called "gut loading"). Also, lightly dust the crickets or mealworms with a calcium/multivitamin preparation such as Miner-All or Reptivite.

Hatchlings should get smaller insects and be fed daily, while adults can take larger prey and may be fed about every other day. Do not leave the insects in the cage for long periods as the activity of uneaten insects may stress the gecko.

Life span

These geckos may live for years – one manual speaks of five to seven years, but other sources place the life span at 10 or more years. A leopard gecko is a long-term pet. Do not get a gecko if your interest in them is likely to last only for months rather than years.

Handling issues

Hatchlings are delicate and should not be handled any more than necessary. Generally, leopard geckos are very mild-mannered and unlikely to bite. They do have strong jaws and small teeth, and so the rare adult leopard gecko that bites will hurt for a while!

To get your gecko used to being handled, sit on the floor and let the gecko crawl on your hands without restraining it. Do this for a few minutes at a time, and over time your gecko will be less likely to try to dart off somewhere. Remember, **never** grab it by the tail, as the tail may break off.

Good hygiene practices are necessary after handling and cage-cleaning. Reptiles can carry the *Salmonella* bacteria, which can give you an uncomfortable gastrointestinal illness and may pose a serious risk to young children and those with compromised immune systems. Wash your hands with soap and water after handling and cage-cleaning, and do not let young children handle the gecko. Do not wash the cage or bowls around food preparation areas.

Cage requirements

A 10-gallon aquarium will do well for one or two leopard geckos. They can also be kept in plastic “critter cages” of similar dimensions or in a plastic storage box with holes drilled in the sides.

A layer of about an inch of substrate can consist of paper towels, newspaper, indoor/outdoor carpet, calcium-carbonate sand (“Calci-Sand”), or “Desert Blend” ground walnut shell.

You should provide one or two hide boxes. You can use a plastic refrigerator dish with a hole cut in the lid. Providing one of these dishes with damp sphagnum or damp paper towels will serve as a humid refuge that may help with shedding.

It is OK if the overall humidity is rather low, so the gecko can choose a humid refuge or a dry area. Temperatures should be kept in the middle to upper 80s (°F) during the day, and should drop to the 70s at night. Heating can be provided with an under-tank heater or a light bulb over the top of the cage where the lizards cannot contact it. Never use a “hot-rock”!

A shallow water bowl should be provided, and the gecko should always have access to clean water.

Leopard geckos do not require special UV lighting.

Reproduction

Leopard geckos breed readily in captivity, and females ordinarily lay 2 eggs per clutch. When incubated at lower temperatures, female lizards

result. If incubated at higher temperatures, males result. If you are interested in breeding your geckos, read one of the several short books on leopard geckos that goes into detail about breeding the lizards and incubating the eggs.

One additional note that is important to know, however: if you keep a group of leopard geckos, you must have only one male (multiple females are OK). Males are aggressive toward other males. Adult leopard geckos (about nine months or older) can be sexed by examining the underside of the gecko near the tail. Males have a slightly V-shaped row of pre-anal pores just above the vent, and hemipenal bulges (slight bulges at the base of the tail) may be noticed.

Avoiding illness & accidents

Providing the right diet and care, and observing the appropriate handling practices outlined here are the most important ways of avoiding accidents or illness. Occasionally, a gecko will become stressed and stop eating. Make sure nobody (and no family pets) are harassing the gecko – keep dogs and cats away from the cage. Limit or reduce handling. Put the stressed lizard in an individual cage if it was kept in a group. Don’t allow feeder insects to remain in the cage and crawl over the lizard or bite it.

Shedding problems may occur if the environment is too dry. If you see dry patches of unshed skin on the gecko, keep it in a moist enclosure overnight and provide a moist hide box.

Most authorities discourage the use of play sand as a substrate because it can cause impactions.

For more information...

Hamper, Robbie (2004) *The leopard gecko in captivity*. Lansing, MI: ECO (Professional Breeders Series)

Tremper, Ron. “Leopard Gecko Care by Ron Tremper.” <http://www.leopardgecko.com/leopard-gecko-care> (accessed 9/2/09)

jsdragons

P.O. Box 150842 ♦ Arlington, TX 76015

<http://www.jsdragons.com>

Jo Smith – js@jsdragons.com

Michael Smith – michael@jsdragons.com