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THE INLAND BEARDED DRAGON

Melissa Kaplan

The inland bearded dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*, formerly classified in the genus *Amphibolurus*) is one of *Pogona* species native to Australia. The bearded dragons live in arid rocky semi-desert and the bordering open forest areas. Adept at climbing, the dragon spends time both in trees and bushes, on fenceposts, and on the ground. After spending the early morning hours basking on rocks, fenceposts or exposed branches, these omnivorous dragons begin to hunt for invertebrates and a wide range of small vertebrates. They also forage for soft plant matter, especially fruits and flowers. Although they are diurnal reptiles, they will spend the hottest part of the day in deep, cool burrows in the warmer parts of their range.

Bearded dragons range in size from four to five inches when hatched to just short of two feet snout-tail length (STL). The color of their bodies range from browns, grays and reddish orange with lighter spots along their sides. When threatened, their color can darken considerably, especially the throat pouch.

Bearded dragons reach reproductive age at one to two years of age. Older females lay up to sixteen eggs in the early summer in a shallow "nest" she has dug in sandy soil. Juveniles, which may weigh as little as 2.1 grams at hatching, are often banded and may have an orange strip near their eyes on the side of their head. As they age, the patterns become less distinct. When mature, the beard on the males darkens somewhat. During breeding season, the beards turn black. Males can further be differentiated from females by their preanal and femoral pores.

The bearded dragon's blunt arrow-shaped head is typical of their agamid relatives. The scales along the skin of the throat and the side of the head have specialized into spiny points. The scales along the sides of their bodies also carry these pointy extensions. When threatened, the dragon flattens out its body to make it look wider, and, by using its hyoid bone, flares out the throat pouch. The threatening vision it projects is often further enhanced by a gaping mouth. In captivity, these social lizards adapt well to their human caretakers so much so that they generally stop giving threat displays, signalling their displeasure only by flattening their bodies.

Dragons are social animals which is one of the reasons they are so engaging and interested in their surroundings in captivity. They frequently become very secure in their environment, and so soon stop displaying their "beard." They perform a very distinctive "wave" which is a way of communicating non-aggression and, similar to iguanas, signal their recognition of other beings in their environment by flicking out their tongues.

HOUSING

Hatchlings should be housed individually as they sometimes will nip others housed with them. Adult bearded dragons have been known to eat young bearded dragons, so young must be housed separately from adults as well.

Bearded dragons can be very quick, making an enclosure which opens at the top a better choice; this will also reduce the chance of crickets escaping. Enclosures must be well ventilated; screen-topped tanks, and chameleon tanks (half of each side and the top is a screen which can be opened).

SUBSTRATE

Astroturf (trim loose threads), butcher paper, unprinted newsprint or paper towels all make serviceable and easily cleaned substrates. Do not use shavings, sand, corn cob or food pellets due to the dangers if ingested and the respiratory problems caused by the dust. Gravel is difficult to clean and disinfect properly, and bearded dragon enclosures need to be cleaned frequently.

FURNISHINGS

Bearded dragons need basking and hiding areas. They also need branches for climbing and basking. A branch can be angled up toward the basking light, making that side of the tank the warmest. A hide log or box should be positioned in the cool side.

HEAT

The temperature gradient during the day should range from 76-86 degrees, with a basking zone ranging from 90-105 degrees. Nighttime temps can drop no lower than the mid to high seventies. Use a subtank heating pad under the warm side, and 75 - 100 watt light bulbs as needed to boost the temps during the day. If you have to use a lightbulb to keep temps up at night, use a blue or green bulb, not white.

LIGHT

As with other diurnal lizards, bearded dragons require at least 12 hours a day under a full-spectrum/uv light.

FOOD

Bearded dragons are omnivorous lizards, and so require a varied diet of prey and plant foods. The plant foods (60-65% of diet) include all of the ingredients used in the iguana diet. Prey (35-40% of diet) include appropriately sized crickets, mealworms, king worms, mouse pinks and hissing cockroaches. If your dragon goes after the prey and ignores the plant food, feed the salad an hour or so before you offer the prey. Be sure to nutrient-load the prey (except pinks) for several days before feeding out.

Young dragons should be fed five days a week, adults three to four times a week.

WATER

Always have an easily accessible bowl of fresh water available.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

The Advanced Vivarium Series has recently published a book on the care and maintenance of bearded dragons. In addition, articles on the bearded dragons have been published in some of the reptile magazines:

Christie, B. (1993) Captive husbandry and reproduction of the Inland Bearded Dragon at the Indianapolis Zoo. *Captive Breeding* 1(2):20 4pp

Fogel, D. (1992) The central bearded dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*). *Rep & Amphib* Nov/Dec 1992:2 3pp

_____ (1993) The inland bearded dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*). *The Vivarium* 4(5):15 3pp