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Ameivas (*Ameiva spp.*)

Jungle Runners of the New World

Ameivas are small to large teiid lizards that are also often alternatively called “Jungle Runners”, as well as other common names such as Central/South American Racerunners, or Whiptails. Ameivas can be highly variable in coloration and patterning depending on the species, as well as sex and age of the animal. Ameivas are typically active, fast moving, and diurnal species of lizards found in open, sandy soiled xeric tropical to sub-tropical environments, where they use their bursts of speed to capture smaller prey in between vegetation and to escape potential predators. As with many other lizard species, ameivas can also drop their tails through caudal autotomy, which momentarily startles and/or distracts the potential predator long enough for the lizard to make an escape. A new tail regenerates after several weeks, although it is somewhat more vestigial than the original. In general, they are often multi colored along their dorsums (backs) and laterals (sides) with various greens, yellows, oranges, blues, reds, browns, and/or reddish browns. There may also often be variable patterning among the species ranging from stripes, spots, dashes, streaks, blotches, speckles, and/or mottling. Scallation tends to be granular, and the heads of most species quite pointed and angled somewhat downward. Commonly kept species include the Giant, or Green Ameiva (*Ameiva ameiva*), Tiger Ameiva (*Ameiva festiva*), Rainbow Ameiva (*Ameiva undulata*), and Common or Puerto Rican Ameiva (*Ameiva exsul*). The many assorted species of ameivas that are available can make for rewarding, active, and personable pets to maintain with the right setups and amount of space, and are sure to not disappoint!

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Lacertilia

Infraorder: Scincomorpha

Family: Teiidae

Genus: *Ameiva*

Species: *Ameiva spp.**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

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Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, and depending on the species, ameivas have the potential to attain longevity of anywhere from 5 to 15 years or more in captivity.

Distribution and Habitat

Ameivas belong to a rather large genus of small to medium sized, primarily tropical to subtropical and mainly terrestrial teiid lizards of Central and South America. Depending on the species, they may be found in tropical to subtropical rainforests and woodlands to drier, more xeric uplands or forests, as well as coastal areas, residential, and agricultural areas from Mexico, Panama, Trinidad, Brazil, Colombia, Suriname, Guyana, Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru, Argentina, and Paraguay as well as the Caribbean islands, Puerto Rico, and other surrounding islands thereof. They will utilize burrows, rocks, logs, tree trunks, downed or low vegetation and other debris on or near the ground to thermoregulate, forage, and seek refuge.

Conservation Status

Conservation status is dependent upon the species. Some are IUCN Least Concern (LC), Near Threatened (NT), Vulnerable (VU), Endangered (EN), Critically Endangered (CE), or Not Evaluated for the IUCN Red List (NE) or otherwise Data Deficient (DD).

Legal and Regulatory Status(*Subject to Change)

Ameiva polops Endangered Species Act of 1974 listed species. Also consult with your local, municipal, and state ordinances and regulations for any ownership restrictions.

Experience Level Required

Novice/Beginner to Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Most hatchling to younger ameivas range under 12 inches in length. Adult ameivas can vary in size depending on the species, although most range from 12 to 24 inches in length. The Giant, or Green ameiva tends to be the largest species, reaching up to 24 inches while most other species remain smaller.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Hatchling or juvenile ameivas can be housed in a 20 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult ameivas require a minimum of a 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure or larger depending on the species. A deep layer of substrate of 5 to 8 inches should be added to the enclosure, as ameivas will burrow and otherwise disrupt the substrate.

Commercially available orchard bark, cypress mulch, potting soil, aspen, or coconut husk substrates are acceptable for ameivas, but must not be toxic. Provide a large sturdy dish of clean water, and change and clean it every several days, or sooner if fouled. Soaking them at least once weekly in lukewarm water for 15 to 20 minutes can also help raise their hydration. Sphagnum moss can also be used as a substrate in hides to help increase humidity. Ameivas can climb if provided the opportunity, but do not require an arboreal setup and are primarily terrestrial. Provide ample basking and hiding opportunities by providing artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, or logs.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

For lighting and heating, maintain ambient temperatures inside the enclosure from 85 to 90 degrees F that can be allowed to drop about 10 degrees F from this at night. Ameivas will also bask, and require basking temperatures of about 95 to 100 degrees F. This can be provided

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through overhead UVA/UVB lighting of appropriate wattage, under tank heating pads (UTHs), ceramic or radiant heat emitters, and/or red bulbs. Temperatures should also be adequately monitored using a reliable thermostat as well. Spot clean the enclosure for urates, feces, or uneaten food at least twice per week. Be sure to periodically replace the substrate, clean, and disinfect the enclosure and its furnishings at minimum every 2 to 3 months, particularly water bowls and substrates intended for raising humidity levels (such as cypress mulch, sphagnum moss, etc.). More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Insectivorous to Omnivorous to Carnivorous Depending on Species; In the wild, ameivas can be insectivorous to omnivorous to carnivorous depending on the species, feeding on many types of insects and other invertebrates, eggs, smaller vertebrates, and carrion, or dead and decaying animal matter. They will also scavenge a variety of fruit, vegetable, and other plant matter as well if available. In captivity, variety is essential to a proper and adequate ameiva diet. Ameivas will accept a variety of feeder insects of appropriate size including crickets, roaches, mealworms, and waxworms) supplemented with vitamin D3 and calcium. Some species will also accept chopped greens, fruits and vegetables as well as ground beef, fish, chicken, liver, or turkey any of which with bone meal added. Frozen-thawed rodents of appropriate size can also be offered, but sparingly, as these food items are high in fat for these lizards. It is also important to remember not to overfeed ameivas, as they can become prone to obesity. An appropriate feeding regime for young and juvenile animals can be daily to 2 to 3 times weekly for adult animals. Calcium and vitamin D3 are important dietary supplements to include in any ameiva diet. Many ameivas can become food aggressive when in the presence of food, and some care should be taken if housing them together during feeding. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Handling

Most of the ameiva species are initially nervous and skittish, but can become quite accustomed to being hand fed and to human presence even when in the wild and habituated to living around people and tourists. Ameivas are still somewhat nervous and fast moving lizards, and tend not to be the most readily handleable lizard species in general, but can become tame and accustomed enough to tolerate short periods of handling with the right amount of patience and dedication. Once in the hand, ameivas can be handled with both hands cupped with care not to drop or restrain them tightly. Restraining ameivas too tightly can potentially injure them and/or cause them to drop their tails through caudal autotomy. Each ameiva is an individual animal, and these techniques may not be effective for all animal, but are nonetheless the most commonly utilized. Ameivas are often overlooked species, but can make for beautiful and very intelligent and personable pets or display animals.

****Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens****

Contact

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this animal, group of animals, or this care sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at info@madisonherps.org

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