



*Raija Hansen

Axolotl (*Ambystoma mexicanum*)

A “Water Dragon” Lost in the Wild

Axolotls, which also are known by many other local common names (including water dogs, water dragons, Mexican salamanders, Mexican walking fish, and other names), are a species of paedomorphic ambystomid salamander, meaning their juvenile larvae stage features are retained as adults. These juvenile larval features can include finned tails, and their characteristic bushy red gills used for oxygen cycling and respiration. In captivity, however, or under forced circumstances, axolotls can metamorphosis in to terrestrial adult salamanders that are dark blackish to olive green with mottling in color, but tend to be fairly short lived thereafter. Axolotls are gray, blackish, brown to olive with a finned tail and large feathery gills. Albinos and other morphs are also widely available. Axolotls are very widely used model organisms in scientific and medical research including for studies in limb and digit growth and regeneration, organ development, and many other fields.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Amphibia

Order: Caudata/Urodela

Suborder: Salamandroidea

Family: Ambystomatidae

Genus: *Ambystoma*

Species: *Ambystoma mexicanum**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care in captivity, axolotls can attain longevity of 10 to 15 years or more.

Distribution and Habitat

The axolotl is an aquatic native only to lakes Xochimilco and Chalco in Mexico City, Mexico, where it is believed by many sources to now be extinct, or extirpated in the wild.

Conservation Status

IUCN Red List Critically Endangered (CE).

Experience Level Required

Novice/Beginner to Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Axolotls are fairly large salamanders that can typically reach up to 8 to 12 inches.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed and escape proof with a secured lid or aquarium hood. Axolotls are fully aquatic and never use dry land. Axolotls require a minimum of a 10 to 20 gallon aquarium depending upon the number of animals housed. Use a quality canister filter and conditioner to help maintain cleanliness inside the aquarium but use an outlet. Axolotls do not tolerate distinct water flow as many fish do. Allow aquarium to cycle for at least 2 to 3 weeks prior to introduction of the axolotl. Provide caves, plants, logs, or other furnishings for added security and hiding opportunities. Substrate is not required, but larger pebbles that cannot be swallowed, or aquarium sand can be used safely with axolotls. If keeping multiple axolotls within a single tank, provide adequate space and food to prevent them from nipping one another. Do not keep fish with axolotls.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Axolotls have simple and undemanding heating and lighting requirements in captivity, and do not require additional UVA/UVB lighting, although providing it in moderated amounts can be greatly beneficial for their health, immune system, and overall wellness. They otherwise do not require any other special lighting or heating unless live plants are also maintained, although water temperatures should be maintained at around 65 to 75 degrees F. Do not exceed 75 degrees F for prolonged periods of time when maintaining axolotls. For any supplemental heating that may be needed, use a low wattage incandescent or UVA/UVB bulb, radiant or ceramic heat emitter, submersible water heater, or UTH (under tank heating element). They are susceptible to health and husbandry related issues if water temperatures are too cold or too warm for these unusual amphibians. 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

Primarily Insectivorous to Carnivorous; Axolotls are largely carnivorous and opportunistic feeders in the wild, feeding on small fish and fish eggs, a wide variety of insects, arthropods, worms, crustaceans, and other invertebrates. In captivity, axolotls can be easily fed, and can readily be given chopped chemical and pesticide free nightcrawlers, earthworms, redworms, isopods, feeder crickets, roaches, waxworms, and mealworms at least two to three times weekly, with this being their recommended feeding frequency. Any feeder insects should also be gut loaded and dusted with additional calcium and vitamin D3 supplements as well prior to feeding to ensure optimal nutrition and health. Some commercially available fish and aquatic turtle diets can also be given. 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

Axolotls are very delicate, soft bodied amphibians that are nearly comprised entirely of cartilage

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rather than true bone. As with all amphibians, their skin is soft and permeable; Wash hands thoroughly and avoid any lotions, creams, or oils before handling any amphibian. Handling axolotls should be minimized whenever possible and only when absolutely necessary. Use a fine mesh net to move capture and move axolotls and to avoid injuring them.

****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

Disclaimer: Note that the information provided in these, or any care sheets, are not intended to be all-exhaustive, and further research and care should always be sought and provided when it comes to any species one may prospectively be interested in. These care sheets are also not intended to serve as substitutes for professional veterinary medical care and husbandry should any animal require it. Always seek proper and professional veterinary care for any animal should the need arise, and be prepared ahead of time for any and all husbandry costs and expenses that may occur with any animal beyond the initial purchase. Any animal owned is ultimately a matter of personal/individual care and responsibility.

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