



Argentine Black and White Tegu *Tupinambis/Salvator merianae*

- Tegus are the largest members of a large group of primarily new world lizards known as the “teiids”, which also include whiptails and racerunners.
- These lizards occur in tropical rainforests, woodlands, and human habitations in Colombia, Argentina, and other surrounding areas of South America.
- Black and white tegus are large lizards superficially resembling a monitor lizard with small, granular scales ranging in color from grayish or blackish, to olive with several rows of darker stripes or banding along the body and whitish speckles, dots, dashes, and blotches. Their tongues are long, forked, and snake-like. Other species of tegus can be reddish, golden-yellow, or bluish in color. Adult male tegus of all species also develop large and distinctive jowels on their cheeks and throats as well.
- If provided the proper care, tegus can attain longevity of 15 to 25 years or more.

Size

Hatchling tegus have a much more vibrant green coloration than adults, and are 8-10”. Most adult tegus range from 3 ½ to 4 ½ feet in length, with males being larger.

Housing

Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Hatchling tegus can initially be started off in a 30 gallon long terrarium or similar sized enclosure for at least a few months, at which enclosure size should be increased accordingly. Hatchling tegus can be house communally in sufficient sized enclosures, but they should be more closely monitored. For a single adult tegu, an enclosure of a minimum of 6’ x 2’ x 2’ or larger is required for these lizards. When they are adults, a custom built enclosure, or one of the suitable sized plastic or injection molded enclosures with front viewing and opening doors are best for an adult tegu.

A deep layer of substrate should be added to the enclosure, as tegus will burrow and otherwise disrupt the substrate. Commercially available orchard bark, cypress mulch, or coconut husk substrates are acceptable for tegus, but must not be toxic. Tegus will frequently disrupt and uproot most plants and other enclosure furnishings, but should still be provided sufficient hiding areas in the form of log or cork hides. A large, sturdy water bowl that ideally allows for soaking should also be provided as well as beneficial misting to maintain adequate levels of hydration and humidity (60-80%). Sphagnum moss can also be used as a substrate in hides to help increase humidity. Tegus can climb if provided the opportunity, but do not require an arboreal setup.

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. Tegus will also bask, and require a UVB basking temperature of about 95 to 100 degrees F. This can be provided through overhead 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 2-3 months, particularly water bowls and substrates intended for raising humidity levels (cypress mulch, sphagnum moss, etc).

Feeding/Diet

In the wild, tegus are omnivorous, and will consume a variety of fruit, vegetable, and other plant matter as well as many types of insects and other invertebrates, small mammals, birds, reptiles, eggs, and carrion (dead animal matter).

In captivity, variety is essential to a proper and adequate tegu diet. Tegus will accept a variety of feeder insects of appropriate size including crickets, roaches, mealworms, and waxworms) supplemented with vitamin D3 and calcium. At least some tegus will also accept chopped 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 tegus.

It is also important to remember not to overfeed tegus, as they can become prone to obesity. An appropriate feeding regime for young and hatchling tegus can be daily to 2 to 3 times weekly for adult animals. Calcium and Vitamin D3 are important dietary supplements to include in any tegu diet. It should be noted that many tegus can become food aggressive when in the presence of food. There are a variety of husbandry methods and techniques different individuals use to reduce or eliminate this behavior that are perhaps beyond the scope of this basic care sheet. If interested in learning more about these techniques, MAHS can be consulted further.

Handling

Argentine black and white tegus, and other species of tegus in general, are animals that require considerable amounts of regular time, patience, and commitment in order to become docile, handleable adult animals. Many different techniques and mindsets are out there with regards to handling and working with these reptiles, which can certainly go into far greater depth than the scope of this basic care sheet. Many believe a more hands off approach is more successful overall, and allowing the animal to gradually and routinely become accustomed to their keeper's presence, to being touched, and handled. Others may choose to practice a more direct, routine handling approach, which may or may not be effective, but often unfortunately causes greater stress and/or injury to the keeper and the animal. Once in the hand, hatchling tegus can be handled with both hands cupped with care not to drop or restrain them tightly. An adult tegu (as well as other species of large lizards) should always receive adequate bodily support from underneath using the hand, and arm for support. Additional restraint can be made by tucking or pinning the animal's tail or hind quarters between the arm and body as well. Each tegu is an individual animal, and these techniques may not be effective for all tegus, but are nonetheless the most commonly utilized. Tegus certainly are not for everyone, but with the right techniques and husbandry, can make for very intelligent and personable pets.

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