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Black Headed and Freckled Monitors *[Varanus* *[Subgenus Odatria] tristis]*

Full of Fun and Freckles!

Black headed and freckled monitors are relatively small to medium sized, arboreal to semi-arboreal monitors indigenous to much of mainland Australia, from New South Wales and Queensland, to South Australia, West Australia, and the North Territory depending upon the subspecies. As with most monitors, these small, energetic dwarf monitors can climb, burrow, and swim well, and are versatile animals which do so to seek shelter, thermoregulate, and in locating prey, often within the cavities of trees, bark, or other vegetation. Two subspecies of these monitors are currently recognized, the Black Headed Monitor, *V. t. tristis*, and the Freckled Monitor, *V. t. orientalis*. They are fairly slender bodied monitors which can vary in ground color from reddish or reddish-brown, to light grayish or grayish-brown or blackish with numerous, lighter colored ocelli along their dorsum and bodies. These energetic monitors have emerged in popularity within the reptile trade, and for the more experienced hobbyist or enthusiast, can make for highly personable and enjoyable species to maintain in captivity.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Lacertilia

Infraorder: Platynota

Family: Varanidae

Genus: *Varanus*

Subgenus: *Odatria*

Species: *Varanus tristis**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, these monitors can attain longevity of 15 to 25 years or more in captivity.

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Distribution and Habitat

The black headed and freckled monitors are generally indigenous to much of mainland Australia, from New South Wales and Queensland, to South Australia, West Australia, and the North Territory depending upon the subspecies. They may be found in dry, arid to semi-arid regions of this range including grassy savannahs, woodlands, and rocky outcroppings.

Conservation Status

Not Evaluated for the IUCN Red List (NE) or otherwise Data Deficient (DD). Similar species are IUCN Least Concern (LC), however.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Hatchling to juvenile black headed and freckled monitors typically range from 2 to 4 inches. As adults, these dwarf monitors may range from 18 to 30 inches depending on species, subspecies, and locality. They seldom exceed 30 inches as most adults.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Hatchling monitors can initially be started off in anywhere from a 20 gallon tall terrarium or similar sized enclosure, but this enclosure size should be increased accordingly. For a single adult monitor, an enclosure of a minimum of a 40 to 55 gallon tall arboreal terrarium or enclosure or larger depending on age, size, subspecies, and locality. A deep layer of at least three to four or more inches of substrate should be added to the enclosure, as these monitors are strong burrowers. Commercially available orchid bark, cypress mulch, chemical and pesticide free potting soil, or coconut fiber substrates are acceptable for these monitors, but must not be toxic. Most monitors will frequently disrupt and uproot most plants and other enclosure furnishings, but should still be provided sufficient hiding and basking areas in the form of log, rock, or cork hides. A large, sturdy water bowl or dish or appropriate size that ideally allows for easy entry and exit, as well as soaking should also be provided as well. These monitors can also be misted at least two to three times weekly to help maintain hydration and humidity. Sphagnum moss can also be used as a substrate in hides to help increase humidity. Being largely arboreal species, these monitors can and will climb if provided the opportunity, and should be provided adequate vertical and diagonal branches, logs, rocks, custom inserted dowels, or other opportunities to enable and provide for climbing and basking opportunities.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

For lighting and heating, these monitors require adequate temperatures, as their biology and natural history indicate appropriately. Maintain ambient temperatures inside the enclosure from 75 to 85 degrees F that can be allowed to drop about 10 degrees F from this at night. These monitors will also bask, and require basking temperatures of anywhere from 120 to 140 degrees F. This can be provided 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, peat moss, or sphagnum moss). More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's

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animals can be given as well.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Insectivorous to Carnivorous; In the wild, black headed and freckled monitors are primarily carnivorous to insectivorous, and will feed on a wide variety of food including insects and other invertebrates, crustaceans, mollusks, and other invertebrates, as well as many small vertebrates including small mammals, birds, bird and reptile eggs, amphibians, and other smaller reptiles. They will also eat carrion, or dead and decaying plant and animal matter as well.

In captivity, variety is essential to a proper and adequate monitor diet. These monitors can be fed a variety of feeder insects of appropriate size including crickets, roaches, mealworms, superworms, and waxworms supplemented with vitamin D3 and calcium. Frozen-thawed rodents of appropriate size and raw food items such as turkey, beef, or eggs can also be offered, but sparingly, if at all, as these food items are high in fat and protein for monitors. It is also important to remember not to overfeed any monitors, as they can become very prone to obesity. Feeding schedules can depend on the age, size, and overall health of your monitor, but typically, an appropriate feeding regime for young and hatchling monitors should be two to three times weekly. Most monitors are very alert, intelligent and personable species that can become food aggressive when in the presence of food, and therefore require additional care when handling. 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

Black headed and freckled monitors are a species that may initially be nervous and skittish, particularly recently acquired specimens. They may bite, claw, tail whip, or otherwise attempt to flee or escape from what they perceive to be a potential threat or predator. However, with regular handling, interaction, these monitors can become more tame and personable pets to maintain provided that they are handled and interacted with regularly in a calm and deliberative manner. Any new animal should of course also be allowed to acclimate to its environment and surroundings before handling attempts are made. Overall, each animal is an individual, and these techniques may not be effective for all monitors, but are nonetheless the most commonly utilized.

****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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