



Desert Iguana (*Dipsosaurus dorsalis*)

Native American Iguanas

Desert iguanas are a relatively small to medium sized species of terrestrial iguana indigenous to the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico. They are perhaps most well adapted and at home in the Southwest and Mexico's hot and arid desert to semi-arid desert and rocky scrublands, where they frequently bask, and can withstand the hottest temperatures during the day of up to 115 degrees F. As with many other reptiles, however, they will also use these opportunities to effectively thermoregulate by seeking refuge in burrows, rock cracks and crevices, or other shaded areas as well. Desert iguanas will also establish territories, where males will perform head bobs, pushups, and other physical signs and gestures to indicate territoriality and dominance. These iguanas are small to medium sized iguanids with blunt, rounded heads, and a ground color ranging from pale grayish, tan, light brown, to cream colored with a series of lighter colored dorsal and lateral reticulate and oscillated markings. Their tails are lighter gray or cream colored with darker spots and bands. Their chins, throats, ventral surfaces, and sides are often lighter colored, and can become pinkish in males during breeding and reproductive seasons. A low ridge or dorsal keel and crest may also be present. Desert iguanas have become increasingly popular native iguanid species to maintain by the intermediate reptile enthusiast, and can become very docile, personable, and entertaining pets to keep if the correct research and husbandry is done.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Lacertilia

Infraorder: Iguania

Family: Iguanidae

Genus: *Dipsosaurus*

Species: *Dipsosaurus dorsalis**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care in captivity, desert iguanas can attain longevity of at least 15 to 25 years, if not more.

Distribution and Habitat

Desert iguanas are indigenous to the creosote brush and scrubland regions, as well as the dry arid semi-arid deserts, subtropical scrub, and subtropical forests and woodlands of the Sonoran and Mojave deserts of the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico.

Conservation Status

IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Young desert iguanas are typically 5 to 6 inches in length. As adults, desert iguanas may range from 16 to 24 inches snout to tail length, seldom reaching larger sizes than this.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Hatchling to juvenile desert iguanas can be housed in a 20 gallon long glass or other terrarium or enclosure. Adult desert iguanas, depending on the age and size of the animal, require a minimum of a 40 to 50 gallon long terrarium or other enclosure of similar size and dimensions. Hatchling and adult desert iguanas will do well on a deep, particulate substrate of at least 3 or more inches, or up to 10 to 12 inches to enable burrowing and digging, and can include play sand mixtures or crushed sand and walnut mixtures. Avoid using substrates made from reptile bark that result in environments that are too humid. Provide a small 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. Provide ample basking and hiding opportunities by providing artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, or logs

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Desert iguanas are well suited for living in hot, arid conditions. For basking, create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure with an appropriate sized under tank heating pad, ceramic, or radiant heat emitter. Ideal temperatures for desert iguanas range in the low to mid 90's degrees F on the cool side and around 90 to 110 degrees F on the warm, basking side. Providing the correct amounts of UVA/UVB overhead incandescent and florescent lighting, and calcium-to-phosphorus ratios is essential for ensuring the health and overall well-being of desert iguanas in captivity. Without UVA/UVB, or adequate amounts of it, they can be susceptible to the abnormal bone growth and development known as Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD), and other health and development maladies. Also be sure to 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. 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 Primarily Herbivorous; In the wild, desert iguanas are primarily a herbivorous species, feeding on a variety of available buds, fruits, vegetables, flowers, and other plant matter with insects and other invertebrates also occasionally being eaten.

Feed desert iguanas in captivity a mixed assortment, or a “reptile salad” consisting of chopped up greens and vegetables daily. These can include carrots, peas, kale, corn, collard and dandelion greens, mustard greens, and beans. Feed green leaf lettuce sparingly, if at all. Plant matter should be 80 to 90% of their diet. Desert iguanas will also accept crickets, roaches, mealworms, superworms, and waxworms as part of a smaller portion of their diet. Be sure to gut load these prey items by feeding them commercially available diets for added nutritional value. Feed desert iguanas these insects in a bowl or dish, and as no more than 10 to 20% of their diet. Young desert iguanas tend to be more carnivorous than adults. Providing calcium and vitamin D3 supplements in any desert iguana diets is essential for their health, nutrition, and well-being. Without the proper diet and amounts of nutrients and supplementation, all iguana species can be very susceptible to Metabolic Bone Disease (or MBD), a debilitating bone and growth disorder, other health and nutritional maladies, or even death in extremely severe cases. 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

As with many reptiles, hatchling and juvenile, or wild caught and otherwise non-acclimated desert iguanas can be initially more nervous and defensive. They may gape, hiss, and puff themselves up to appear larger and more intimidating. Handle your desert iguana gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Some individuals may be slightly more skittish than others, but most adults will settle down considerably and become quite docile, personable, and interactive pets to keep with the correct care and handling.

****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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