



\*Lesley Marshall

## Jackson's Chameleon (*Chamaeleo/Trioceros jacksonii*)

---

### **Three Horned “Triceratops” Chameleons**

Also known as the Jackson's horned or three horned chameleon, the Jackson's chameleon is a relatively small to medium sized chameleon that is characterized by its green base color with three prominent horns in males, and absent or greatly reduced horns in females. The purpose and function of these horns remains to be fully known and understood, although they are likely used, and tends to be most prominent in male chameleons, for sexual selection, courtship, and reproductive behaviors and displays, as well as possibly to assist in further distorting the chameleon's outline to potential predators. As with most other chameleon species, Jackson's chameleons are sexually dimorphic in terms of their sizes and coloration, appearance, and color intensity, with females and juvenile Jackson's chameleons typically becoming less vibrantly colored than males. Jackson's chameleons are perhaps one of the hardiest, inexpensive, and widely kept and available chameleons in the pet trade, and can provide years of enjoyment and satisfaction for those ready to take on a chameleon.

Chameleons in general are a highly diverse and specialized family of Old World lizards with several extremely unique features and adaptations for survival. Perhaps best known are their color and/or pattern changing abilities. The skin and scales of chameleons possess a thin, superficial layer of color changing pigments, with another deeper layer consisting of guanine cells. In order to change their coloration, chameleons rely on changing the space and distance between these guanine cells, thereby changing the wavelengths of light reflected from the skin and scales. While it is popularly believed that chameleons change their colors and patterns for camouflage or crypsis, and while it is true that this has functions in concealing the animal from predators and prey, this is not the primary reason for their color changes. Instead, they will change color as a means of social signaling, to display territoriality and dominance, displaying defensive behaviors, and/or to aid in thermoregulation. Most chameleons also have highly specialized zygodactylus feet and prehensile tails for climbing and gripping branches as well. They also have highly modified and rapidly extrudable sticky tongues used and designed for capturing prey. Chameleons also possess a pair of highly mobile, independently operating eyes, giving them excellent depth perception and motor coordination as well. These are only some of the many unique features chameleons possess, making them popular and unusual pet reptiles to maintain in herpetoculture.

### **Taxonomy**

**Life:** All living, physical, and animate entities

<http://www.madisonherps.org>

**Domain:** Eukaryota  
**Kingdom:** Animalia  
**Phylum/Sub Phylum:** Chordata/Vertebrata  
**Class:** Reptilia  
**Order:** Squamata  
**Suborder:** Lacertilia  
**Infraorder:** Iguania  
**Family:** Chamaeleonidae  
**Subfamily:** Chamaeleoninae  
**Genus:** Triceros/Chamaeleo  
**Species:** *Triceros/Chamaeleo jacksonii*\*  
*\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

### **Lifespan and Longevity**

If provided the proper care, Jackson's chameleons can attain longevity of 4 to 10 years on average depending on male or female. Males are generally larger and longer lived than females.

### **Distribution and Habitat**

The Jackson's chameleon is found in forested and savannah regions of eastern Africa including Kenya and Tanzania. They have also been introduced in some other areas of the world including Hawaii, Florida, and several other areas of the United States and elsewhere.

### **Conservation Status**

IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

### **Experience Level Required**

Intermediate/Moderate.

### **Size**

Adult Jackson's chameleons range in size from 7 to 10 inches on average.

### **Housing and Enclosure**

Housing must be sealed, well ventilated, and escape proof. Hatchling and juvenile chameleons up to around six to eight months can be maintained in roughly a 20 gallon tall enclosure, but be sure to not use too large of enclosures as they can become stressed and have greater difficulty finding their food. Most adult chameleons should be kept in at least a 30 to 50 gallon tall or equivalent sized enclosure. Glass or screen enclosures can be used depending on your household's ambient temperature and humidity. Providing a substrate is optional as chameleons are arboreal and will seldom use it, but substrates that can be provided can include cypress mulch, sphagnum moss, chemical and pesticide free potting soils, or coconut fiber. Chameleons are highly arboreal and specialized lizards that require additional climbing, basking, and hiding opportunities by providing additional vertical artificial foliage, driftwood, branches, logs, and other furnishings. Most chameleons also will not recognize standing water, and should be misted, by hand or with a commercially available misting and/or fogging system to ensure they receive adequate moisture and hydration.

### **Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity**

Provide a lighting and temperature gradient for Jackson's chameleons from 80 degrees F to 85 degrees F. Use an infrared night time bulb to create nighttime temperature gradients of 75 to 85 degrees F. Use florescent, broad spectrum, and UVA/UVB lighting, as well as exposure to natural sunlight for optimal health of Jackson's chameleons. Providing the correct amounts of

<http://www.madisonherps.org>

UVA/UVB overhead incandescent and florescent lighting, and calcium-to-phosphorus ratios is essential for ensuring the health and overall well-being of Jackson's chameleons 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***; In the wild, Jackson's chameleons are primarily insectivorous, feeding on insects and other invertebrates they can locate and capture using their specialized eye-sight and long sticky tongues. In captivity, feed Jackson's chameleons a variety of appropriately sized feeder insects such as crickets, roaches, mealworms, superworms, and waxworms. Feeder insects should be gut-loaded in order to increase their optimal nutritional value. Jackson's chameleons also require additional calcium and vitamin D3 supplementation 1 to 2 times weekly or as otherwise directed for optimal health and development. This is in order to prevent Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD) and other growth and nutritional deficiencies. Their feeding frequency will depend on the age, size, and overall health of your animal. Food can be given by hand or in a small dish mounted off of the enclosure's floor for arboreal animals. Use care as to not overfeed them, as obesity and other health related issues can become an issue. 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**

Jackson's chameleons will generally not tolerate frequent handling, and it should be kept to low levels. Should a chameleon be handled, it is important to remember to not forcefully pick up the animal, which may lead to further stress and/or injury. Allow a chameleon to walk onto your hands or gently coax them to do so if possible. Generally, chameleons are better suited as 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](mailto: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.*

\*Copyright Madison Area Herpetological Society, 2017

<http://www.madisonherps.org>