



Madagascar Swifts (*Chalarodon spp.*) and (*Oplurus spp.*)

Oddball Madagascar Natives

Also known as the Madagascar “iguanids”, these two genera of relatively small lizards belong to an unusual clade of iguanid lizards bearing strong resemblances to the New World swifts, of which they are not closely related to. Indigenous only to the island of Madagascar, these unique little lizards can occupy several different habitats and niches on the island, depending on the genus and species. Some species occupy arboreal niches, being found among tall shrubs, trees, and the lower canopies, while other species tend to be more terrestrial to rock dwelling. Two species are currently recognized in the genus *Chalarodon*, while the genus *Oplurus* currently consists of six species.

The scales of these lizards are heavily keeled, giving them a spiny texture and appearance. Males are usually more vibrantly colored than females or juveniles, and, during the breeding and reproductive season, develop vibrantly colored throats, sides and ventral surfaces (or bellies). These lizards also will display a variety of social structure behaviors to signal territory, dominance, and courtship including arm waving, head bobbing, and/or pushups. Ground color and pattern can vary considerably depending on the age, sex, genus, and species with some species being quite vibrantly colored with reds, oranges, yellows, blues, and other colors. Many can also have darker dorsal to lateral crossbanding or other darker markings as well. The genus *Chalarodon* can also be identified by their low dorsal crests, while members of the *Oplurus* genus lack dorsal crests, and bear strong resemblance to the New World swifts, but can be identified by their much more heavily armored or spiny tails. At least several species can also be identified by their narrow, dark collar-band on the neck to dorsal-pectoral. As with many other lizards, these lizards can also drop their tails through caudal autotomy when threatened or handled roughly, which temporarily startles and/or distracts the predator long enough for the lizard to make its escape. A new tail then regrows over several weeks, but tends to be more vestigial than the original. These lizards, although small, are bold, active, and personable little lizards that can make for very hardy, inexpensive, and satisfying pets for the beginning to intermediate enthusiast.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Lacertilia

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Infraorder: Iguania

Family: Opluridae

Genera: Oplurus and Chalarodon

Species: *Chalarodon madagascariensis* and *Chalarodon steinkampi*.*

Oplurus cyclurus, *O. cuvieri*, *O. fierinensis*, *O. grandidieri*, *O. quadrimaculatus*, and *O. saxicola*.

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, these lizards can attain longevity of 5 to 10 years or potentially more.

Distribution and Habitat

Members of the genera Chalarodon and Oplurus are indigenous primarily to the island of Madagascar near the southeastern coast of Africa, where the different genera and species often occupy differing ranges, habitats, and niches within Madagascar. Within this range, these species of lizards occupy primarily terrestrial to semi-arboreal environments, including rocky, arid to semi-arid or tropical to semi-tropical habitats including deserts to semi-deserts, dry, rocky steppes, and open forests and woodlands, scrublands, to savannahs, grasslands, and even suburban areas where they use rocks, logs, tree trunks, downed or low vegetation and other debris on or near the ground to thermoregulate, forage, and seek refuge.

Conservation Status

Conservation status is dependent upon the species. Most are IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

Legal and Regulatory Status(*Subject to Change)

Consult with your local, municipal, and state ordinances and regulations for any ownership restrictions.

Experience Level Required

Novice/Beginner to Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Most Madagascar swift species are fairly small lizards that typically reach 4 to 9 ½ inches as adults. A few of the largest species can reach up to 14 to 15 inches.

Housing and Enclosure

Provide a sturdy and secure enclosure that is escape proof. These lizards are active and arboreal to terrestrial lizards that can be maintained in at least a 20 to 30 gallon tall, well ventilated glass or screen terrarium or enclosure depending on one's ambient household temperatures and humidity as well as the species. Slightly dampened peat moss, untreated potting soil, orchid bark substrates, crushed walnut substrates, or sphagnum moss can be utilized for a substrate. Additional furnishings for basking, climbing, hiding opportunities are also important components to a spiny lizard setup, and should include natural or artificial foliage, rocks, logs, vines, or branches. These lizards can be misted periodically or can be provided a small, shallow water dish that should be cleaned and replaced regularly at least two to three times weekly.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Madagascar swifts will also bask, and thus a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure with an appropriate sized under tank heating pad, ceramic, or radiant heat emitter should be provided. Ideal temperatures for these lizards range from 75 to 80 degrees F as an

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ambient temperature and around 90 to 95 degrees F on the warm, basking side. Desert to semi-desert species can tolerate slightly higher basking temperatures. 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 these lizards 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, Madagascar swifts are primarily insectivorous, feeding on small insects and other invertebrates, although very small vertebrates may also be eaten. In captivity, feed these lizards 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. These lizards 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. 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

Madagascar swifts can be handled or restrained for short periods of time, but are typically not an overly suitable hands on species that tolerates frequent and/or prolonged handling. Too much handling will stress these species, and they are better maintained overall as a more hands off animal whenever possible.

****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

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