



Spiny Lizards, Western and Central American Species (*Sceloporus spp.*)

Hardy, North American “Blue Bellies”

Also known as “swifts”, these small to medium sized lizards belong to a large, diverse “spiny lizard” family consisting of over 180 species and subspecies. Their other common names often include the blue bellied lizards, prairie lizards/swifts, sagebrush lizards, scrub lizards, and/or fence swifts. Their scales 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 vibrant blue throats, sides and ventral surfaces (or bellies). Spiny 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, and species with some species being quite vibrantly colored with reds, oranges, yellows, blues, and other colors. As with many other lizards, spiny 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 enthusiast.

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: Phrynosomatidae

Genus: *Sceloporus*

Species: *Sceloporus spp.**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

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

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Distribution and Habitat

The western and Central American spiny lizards belong to a very large and diverse group of relatively small, spiny, arboreal to semi-arboreal lizards with a wide distribution depending on the exact species and subspecies. These western species can inhabit southwestern to south-central Canada from British Columbia and Alberta, through the northwestern, western, and southwestern to south-central United States, and throughout Mexico and throughout much of Central America to Panama. Within this range, these western species of swifts occupy primarily terrestrial to semi-arboreal environments, including rocky, arid to semi-arid habitats such as deserts to semi-deserts, dry 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. Some are IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC), Near Threatened (NT), Vulnerable (VU), Endangered (EN), Critically Endangered (CE), or Not Evaluated for the IUCN Red List (NE) or otherwise Data Deficient (DD).

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.

Size

Most spiny lizard species are fairly small lizards that typically reach 4 to 7 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. Spiny lizards are active and arboreal 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. 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

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 swifts range from 75 to 80 degrees F as an ambient temperature and around 90 to 95 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 fence 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

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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, spiny lizards are primarily insectivorous, feeding on small insects and other invertebrates. In captivity, feed spiny 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. Fence 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

Spiny 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 this 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

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. MAHS cannot make any claims or guarantees regarding any information in this care sheet therein. This care sheet may be reprinted or redistributed only in its entirety, including any and all MAHS logos and disclaimers. Last Updated: 16 December 2018.

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