



\*Lesley Marshall

## Panther Chameleon (*Furcifer pardalis*)

### **Vibrant and Eye-Catching Mainstream Chameleons**

Panther chameleons are a large chameleon species indigenous to the tropical forests and woodlands of Madagascar that can vary considerably in color depending on locale, gender, age, and disposition, with reds, oranges, blues, greens, yellows, blacks, or whites to emerald green or turquoise being noted on a highly variable patterning of darker bands, stripes, and/or spots. Panther chameleons are sexually dimorphic in terms of their sizes and coloration and color intensity, with females and juvenile panther chameleons typically becoming less vibrantly colored than males. Furthermore, the crests on both genders of panther chameleons tend to be low and less distinct than some other chameleon species. Panther chameleons are a widely sought after, bold, and spirited chameleon species that has attracted a strong following among the intermediate to advanced enthusiasts.

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

**Domain:** Eukaryota

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Phylum/Sub Phylum:** Chordata/Vertebrata

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**Class:** Reptilia  
**Order:** Squamata  
**Suborder:** Lacertilia  
**Infraorder:** Iguania  
**Family:** Chamaeleonidae  
**Genus:** Furcifer  
**Species:** *Furcifer pardalis*\*  
*\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

### **Lifespan and Longevity**

If provided the proper care, panther chameleons can attain longevity of 5 to 8 years on average.

### **Distribution and Habitat**

The Panther chameleon is indigenous to the tropical to sub-tropical primary and secondary forests and woodlands of the island of Madagascar and surrounding islands near Africa.

### **Conservation Status**

IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

### **Experience Level Required**

Intermediate/Moderate.

### **Size**

Adult Panther chameleons range in size from 10 to 18 inches, with males being the larger of the two sexes.

### **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 panther chameleons from 85 degrees F to 95 degrees F. Use an infrared night time bulb to create nighttime temperature gradients of 75 to 85 degrees F. 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 panther 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

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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, panther 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 panther 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. Panther 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**

As with most chameleons, panther 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)

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