



Sailfin Dragons (*Hydrosaurus* spp.)

Real Life Dragons with a Sail

Sailfin dragons are medium to large agamid lizards with very distinctive sails atop the bases of their tails. Other common, or vernacular names for these lizards include the sailfin lizards, and sailfin water lizards. Sailfin dragons are frequently found in close proximity to rivers or other water sources, where they will drop and flee from their nearby basking location, and can either run bipedally across water for short distances similar to basilisks and/or dive to the bottom for up to an hour when threatened. Sailfin dragons can be quite variable in color and appearance depending on the species, as well as age and sex of the animal. In general, sailfins can range from a solid to mottled light to dark brown, olive, dark greenish, or olive brown, blackish, to yellowish in color with a low dorsal ridge or row of spines present. Male Philippines sailfin dragons will often develop darker blackish, purplish, to deep indigo blue jaws, limbs, and pelvic/pectoral regions. The most prominent identifying feature of sailfin dragons of all species are their large, upright cartilaginous “fins” or “sails” beginning at the bases of their tails and spanning to about halfway down the tail.

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: Agamidae

Subfamily: Hydrosaurinae

Genus: *Hydrosaurus*

Species: *Hydrosaurus* spp.*

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, sailfin dragons can attain longevity of at least 15 to 20 years or more in captivity.

Species

Three (3) species of sailfin dragons are currently recognized: the Amboina Sailfin Dragon

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(*Hydrosaurus amboinensis*), Philippines Sailfin Dragon (*Hydrosaurus pustulatus*), and the Barbour's or Weber's Sailfin Dragon (*Hydrosaurus weberi*). Of these species, the Philippines sailfin dragon is perhaps the most commonly kept and seen species in the reptile industry.

Distribution and Habitat

Sailfin dragons are relatively large, semi-aquatic agamid lizards indigenous to southern to southeastern Asia, namely the Philippines, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea. This range is furthermore dependent upon the species, with individual species often having even more limited ranges within this distribution. Within their range, these unique lizards occur in humid, lowland tropical to sub-tropical rainforests, forests, and woodlands, often near rivers and riverbanks, rice paddies and irrigated croplands and agricultural areas, swamplands, and other bodies of water and ample overhanging or nearby basking locations, which allow for these lizards to retreat across when threatened by would be predators.

Conservation Status

Conservation status dependent upon the species. Some species are IUCN Vulnerable (VU). Some are 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

Intermediate/Moderate to Advanced.

Size

Young sailfin dragons range from 7 to 12 inches as hatchlings. They are sexually dimorphic, with males reaching 1/3rd larger sizes than females. Adult sailfins typically range from 3 to 4 ½ feet in length, or 36 to 54 inches.

Housing and Enclosure

Sailfin dragons are both quite semi arboreal and semi aquatic lizards, and housing and enclosures must allow for and reflect their natural history and habits as closely as possible. Housing must be sealed and escape proof, as well as be adequately ventilated. Hatchling to young sailfin dragons up to 15 to 16 inches can be housed in a 40 gallon terrarium or other glass or plastic enclosure. Depending on the size of adult specimens of each species, a minimum of a five foot by 2 foot by five foot custom enclosure should be provided for housing an adult sailfin dragon. Sailfin dragons can also be housed in pairs in appropriately larger housing, but do not house males together as they are territorial. Visual barriers of adequate height roughly 5 to 6 inches for hatchlings and juveniles, and approximately 12 inches for adults for housing any age or size sailfin should also be utilized to increase security as well as humidity that these active lizards require. For substrate, sailfins dragons will do best on organic substrates that retain humidity well on a substrate such as pesticide free potting soil, cypress mulch, coconut fibers, or peat/sphagnum moss as well as mixtures thereof. Being largely semi aquatic lizards, providing the correct amount of water and hydration is also a very important component to maintaining sailfin dragons in captivity. Daily or regular misting should be utilized to ensure proper hydration and shedding, and a large, sturdy enough water dish or pan for the animal to readily enter and be able to completely submerge itself are also important components to provide. Water should be cleaned, filtered, and replaced regularly at minimum two to three times weekly, especially whenever fouled. Sailfin dragons are arboreal lizards, and should be given adequate climbing, hiding, and basking opportunities in the enclosure as well. Several large, horizontal,

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diagonal, and vertical branches, logs, securely fastened and installed bamboo or other rods or dowels, or even built in shelves of the walls inside the enclosure as well as other live or artificial foliage should be features provided in any sailfin dragon enclosure or setup for added safety and security, as well as aesthetic appeal.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

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 sailfin dragons 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.

A thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure should be created. Ideal ambient and cool side temperatures for sailfins range from 85 to 90 degrees F on the cool and ambient temperatures and around 115 to 120 degrees F on the warm, basking side. Nighttime temperatures can be allowed to drop to between 75 and 80 degrees F. Undertank heating pads and ceramic and radiant heat emitters can also be used as supplemental heating devices as well if needed. 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

Herbivorous to Omnivorous; In the wild, sailfins are omnivorous, meaning they will eat both plant and animal matter. They will eat an assortment of insects and other invertebrates, fruit and vegetable material, and even other small vertebrates on occasion. Feed sailfin dragons in captivity a small amount or assortment of chopped up fruits and vegetables including bananas, cantaloupe, berries, carrots, peas, collard and dandelion greens, other edible and non-toxic flowers, and beans. Feed green leaf lettuce sparingly if at all. Sailfin dragons will also readily accept a variety of appropriately sized feeder insects including crickets, mealworms, superworms, super worms, feeder roaches, and waxworms. Gut load these prey items by feeding them commercially available diets for added nutritional value. As they grow and become older, sailfin dragons can also be given further diversity in their diets to include occasional small pre-killed rodents, ground beef or turkey, shrimp, and other edible crustaceans as well, but feed them any of these items sparingly, if at all. Some forms of commercially available omnivore diets for other more commonly kept lizard species can also be acceptable for sailfin dragons. Food for sailfin dragons can be offered or provided in a bowl or dish daily to every other day. Providing calcium and vitamin D3 supplements in their diets at least 2 to 3 times weekly is essential for their overall health and well-being. 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 sailfins often tend to be initially more nervous and defensive. Handle your sailfin gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. They are not overly defensive lizards, but overall, sailfins tend to be somewhat more skittish and flighty lizards than many other popular species in captivity when it comes to handling, but they can become accustomed to and tolerate some levels of gentle handling by the more intermediate enthusiast or pet owner. Adult sailfins can become impressive and attractive medium sized display animals as well that are often coveted.

**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

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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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