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Giant Girdled Lizard/Sungazer (*Cordylus/Smaug giganteus*)

Sought After Sun-Baskers

The giant girdled, or more commonly known as the “sungazer”, is a medium sized to large species of terrestrial lizard indigenous to the Highveld grassland regions of southern sub-Saharan Africa. This species is the largest member of the cordylid family of lizards, also known as the armadillo, or girdled lizards due to their heavily plated and spiny external appearance used to more efficiently thermoregulate and to deter potential would be predators. The sungazer is a moderate to heavily built, terrestrial or ground dwelling lizard which can range in color from yellowish, to brownish or brownish-yellow, or sometimes reddish-brown with heavily plated and armored scales and spines along most, if not all of its body. The most distinctive identifying features of these lizards are their row of elongated occipital spines behind their heads, and enlarged, heavily keeled scales and spines on their caudal, or tails. These lizards frequently bask near rock crevices and other burrows, where they earn the name “sungazers” from their unique thermoregulatory behaviors of elevating the anterior portions of their bodies to appear as if they are staring or gazing upwards at the sun. In past decades, these lizards were imported somewhat regularly for the pet trade, but unfortunately, due to over-collection and habitat loss, are now a threatened species, and their populations and numbers have declined significantly. While the sungazer has proven to have been difficult to keep and breed in captivity, for the more intermediate to advanced enthusiast, these very unique species can make for very personable and enjoyable, if not challenging species to maintain in captivity.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Lacertilia

Infraorder: Scincomorpha

Family: Cordylidae

Genus: *Cordylus/Smaug*

Species: *Cordylus/Smaug giganteus**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

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Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, giant girdled lizards, or sungazers can attain potential longevity of 10 to 15 years or more.

Distribution and Habitat

The giant girdled lizard, or sungazer, is a unique genus and species of medium sized to large, primarily terrestrial lizards indigenous to sub-Saharan South Africa. More specifically, this unusual species occurs in small, scattered populations within the Republic of South Africa, as well as extreme western Natal, and southeastern Transvaal. Within this range, the sungazer, armadillo, or girdled lizards occupy primarily terrestrial environments, including semi-deserts, chaparral, grasslands, open woodlands, and even suburban areas, where they use burrows, rocks and rock crevices, logs, tree trunks, downed or low vegetation and other debris on or near the ground to thermoregulate, forage, and seek refuge.

Conservation Status

The giant girdled lizard, or sungazer is currently listed as an IUCN Vulnerable, and Threatened species (VU).

Legal and Regulatory Status(*Subject to Change)

Cordylus spp. are CITES Appendix II as of October 2017. Hemicordylus spp. is CITES Appendix II as of October 2017. Smaug spp. is CITES Appendix II as of October 2017. Also consult with your local, municipal, and state ordinances and regulations for any ownership restrictions.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate to Advanced.

Size

The giant girdled lizard, or sungazer, is a medium sized to large cordylid lizard, which can attain adult sizes of 8 to 13 inches, snout to tail length on average, although up to 15 inches is also known.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Hatchling and juvenile armadillo lizards can be housed in a 10 to 15 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult sungazers require a minimum of a 40 to 60 gallon long terrarium or enclosure, or larger. Hatchling and adult armadillo lizards can be maintained on a substrate of cage carpet or terrarium liner, play sand mixture, orchid bark, or ground walnut shell substrates. Avoid using substrates made from reptile bark that result in environments that are too humid. Provide a small dish of clean water, and change and clean it every several days, or sooner if fouled. Soaking them at least once weekly in lukewarm water for 15 to 20 minutes can also help raise their hydration. Provide ample basking and hiding opportunities by providing artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, or logs.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

For basking, create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure with an appropriate sized under tank heating pad, ceramic, or radiant heat emitter. Ideal temperatures for these lizards range from 70 to 85 degrees F on the cool side/ambient temperature and around 95 to 100 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

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the health and overall well-being of armadillo 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

Herbivorous to Omnivorous; In the wild, sungazers, or giant girdled lizards are omnivorous to herbivorous, meaning they will eat a variety of both plant and animal matter including insects and other invertebrates. They will also eat some fruit, vegetable, and other plant matter as well. This species may also even consume small vertebrates on occasion if they can be captured. In captivity, these lizards can be offered a mixed, varied omnivorous diet consisting of appropriately sized feeder insects such as crickets, mealworms, superworms, roaches, and waxworms 2 to 3 times weekly. Gut load any live prey items by feeding them commercially available diets for added nutritional value. Armadillo lizards may eat small pre-killed rodents of appropriate size for added protein, but sparingly, if at all. They will also often eat a mixed assortment of chopped greens, fruits and vegetables daily including dark leafy greens, carrots, peas, collard and dandelion greens, and beans. Feed armadillo lizards these insects and other food items in a bowl or dish every other day. Providing calcium and vitamin D3 supplements in these lizard's diets is essential for their optimal 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

The girdled and armadillo lizards may initially be somewhat skittish, but can often normally become a docile species that can be handled and interacted with quite readily in captivity. As with any animal though, care should be taken to avoid dropping or overly restraining them to prevent injury.

****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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