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Whiptails and Racerunners (*Aspidoscelis spp.*) and (*Cnemidophorus spp.*)

Bolts and Flashes of Color!

Whiptails and racerunners belong to a large and very diverse group of teiid lizards indigenous to much of the New World depending upon species, including North America, Central, and South America. They are generally found in open, dry, sunny upland or xeric environments with sandy soil and sparse vegetation, where they quickly and actively forage for insects and other small animals during the day. They have also recently been divided taxonomically into at least two genera, the northern whiptails (*Aspidoscelis spp.*) and the southern whiptails (*Cnemidophorus spp.*). Reproduction can occur sexually or parthenogenetically, and in some whiptail species, populations, and/or even individuals, specimens may consist entirely of self-reproducing females. Whiptail species can vary tremendously in size, coloration, and pattern depending on age, sex, species, and other environmental factors, with many having spots, flecks, dashes blotches, stripes, and/or other coloration and patterning. Several of the more colorful and vibrantly colored Neotropical species, such as the Rainbow Whiptails, *C. lemniscatus*, with varying degrees of blues, greens, reds, yellows, and/or oranges are also popular in the pet trade as well.

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: Teiidae

Genus: *Cnemidophorus* and *Aspidoscelis*

Species: *Aspidoscelis spp.** and *Cnemidophorus spp.**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, and depending on the species, whiptails and racerunners have the potential to attain longevity of anywhere from 5 to 15 years or more in captivity.

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Distribution and Habitat

Whiptails and racerunners belong to a rather large genus of small to medium sized, temperate to tropical to sub-tropical and mainly terrestrial teiid lizards, with species over much of the United States, Central and South America. In the U.S., species are most common and diverse in the southwest, southern, and southeastern regions, although some also occur in other areas such as the Midwest, but often tend to reach the northern limits of their ranges and are, at least in some cases, geographically isolated. Depending on the species, they may be found in tropical to subtropical rainforests and woodlands to drier, more open and xeric uplands, fields, prairies, savannahs, or forests, as well as coastal areas, residential, and agricultural areas from Mexico, Panama, Trinidad, Brazil, Colombia, Suriname, Guyana, Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru, Argentina, and Paraguay as well as the Caribbean islands, Puerto Rico, and other surrounding islands thereof.

Conservation Status

Conservation status is dependent upon the species. Some are IUCN 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)

Cnemidophorus vanzoi is Endangered Species Act of 1974 listed species. Also consult with your local, municipal, and state ordinances and regulations for any ownership restrictions.

Experience Level Required

Novice/Beginner to Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Most hatchling to younger whiptails and racerunners range under 12 inches in length. Whiptails and racerunners can vary in size depending on the species, although most range from 4 to 9 inches in length. Some of the larger species, and sometimes specimens thereof, can reach upwards of 12 to 14 inches in size.

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Hatchling or juvenile whiptails can be housed in a 20 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult whiptails require a minimum of a 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure or larger depending on the species. A deep layer of substrate of 5 to 8 inches should be added to the enclosure, as whiptails will burrow and otherwise disrupt the substrate. Commercially available orchard bark, cypress mulch, potting soil, aspen, or coconut husk substrates are acceptable for whiptails, but must not be toxic. Provide a large sturdy 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. Sphagnum moss can also be used as a substrate in hides to help increase humidity. Whiptails can climb if provided the opportunity, but do not require an arboreal setup and are primarily terrestrial. Provide ample basking and hiding opportunities by providing artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, or logs.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

For lighting and heating, maintain ambient temperatures inside the enclosure from 85 to 90 degrees F that can be allowed to drop about 10 degrees F from this at night. Whiptails will also bask, and require a UVB basking temperature of about 95 to 100 degrees F. This can be provided through overhead UVB lighting of appropriate wattage, under tank heating pads (UTHS),

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ceramic or radiant heat emitters, and/or red bulbs. Temperatures should also be adequately monitored using a reliable thermostat as well. 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, particularly water bowls and substrates intended for raising humidity levels (cypress mulch, sphagnum moss, etc.). 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 to Omnivorous to Carnivorous Depending on Species; In the wild, whiptails are can be insectivorous to omnivorous to carnivorous depending on species, feeding on many types of insects and other invertebrates, eggs, smaller vertebrates, and carrion, or dead and decaying animal matter. They will also scavenge a variety of fruit, vegetable, and other plant matter as well if available.

In captivity, variety is essential to a proper and adequate whiptail diet. Whiptails will accept a variety of feeder insects of appropriate size including crickets, roaches, mealworms, and waxworms) supplemented with vitamin D3 and calcium. Some species will also accept chopped greens, fruits and vegetables as well as ground beef, fish, chicken, liver, or turkey any of which with bone meal added. Frozen-thawed rodents of appropriate size can also be offered, but sparingly, as these food items are high in fat for these lizards. It is also important to remember not to overfeed whiptails, as they can become prone to obesity. An appropriate feeding regime for young and juvenile animals can be daily to 2 to 3 times weekly for adult animals. Calcium and vitamin D3 are important dietary supplements to include in any whiptail diet. Many whiptails can become food aggressive when in the presence of food, and some care should be taken if housing them together during feeding. 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

Most of the whiptail species are initially nervous and skittish, but can become quite accustomed to being hand fed and to human presence even when in the wild and habituated to living around people and tourists. They are still somewhat nervous and fast moving lizards, and tend not to be the most readily handleable lizard species in general, but can become tame and accustomed enough to tolerate short periods of handling with the right amount of patience and dedication. Once in the hand, whiptails can be handled with both hands cupped with care not to drop or restrain them tightly. Restraining them too tightly can potentially injure them and/or cause them to drop their tails through caudal autotomy. Each one is an individual animal, and these techniques may not be effective for all animal, but are nonetheless the most commonly utilized. Whiptails are often overlooked species, but can make for beautiful and very intelligent and personable pets or 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

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

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