

Blue-Tongued Skinks (*Tiliqua* species)

Introduction to Blue-Tongued Skinks

Blue-tongued Skinks are from Australia, New Guinea, Tasmania, and Indonesia and have been an important part of the reptile hobby for almost 20 years. The species from Australia are quite rare in captivity but Blue-tongues have been imported from Indonesia in relatively large numbers in recent years. They are hardy, great eaters, and breed well, producing from two to six live babies, depending on the species.

Blue-tongues are heavy-bodied with small, stubby legs. They have large triangular heads with strong jaw muscles. They grow from 7 to 24" in length, depending on the species. New Guinea Blue-tongue Skinks (*Tiliqua gigas*) are generally gray or gray-brown with narrow dark bands of irregular shape across the back. *T. gigas* is one of the largest species of Blue-tongue Skink and can reach lengths of 24 inches. They are from Indonesia.

Northern Blue-tongued Skinks (*T. s. intermedia*) prefer tropical or savannah woodlands of Northern Australia. Often considered the largest of the Blue-tongued Skinks it can reach lengths of 24 to 27". It generally has uniform vertical bands which are usually chestnut colored, with orange shaded off-centered markings on the sides. As with the Eastern, the legs are gray and unmarked. Because of their gentle demeanor this subspecies generally makes for the best choice if you want a pet that is calm and easy to handle.

Kei Island Blue-tongued Skinks (*T. gigas keyensis*) are skinks that are very popular in the reptile hobby in recent years. They are available in a wide array of color and patterns but are typically dark lizards with brown or black banding. Large, nearly patternless specimens are also seen.

The Merauke Blue-tongued Skink (*T. gigas evanescens*) was described in 2000 and it is a large, slender species, some with some specimens reaching over 24" in total length.

T. gerrardii, the Pink-tongued Skink is found in New South Wales, Eastern Australia and can grow to 12 to 14" in length. This species is generally nocturnal in the warmer weather and becomes diurnal in colder weather. Their natural environment is generally wetter than most other species. It feeds almost exclusively on snails and slugs.

If kept properly, Blue-tongued Skinks can live for 15 to 20 years and probably longer.

Housing Blue-Tongued Skinks

Most babies can be kept in a 10-gallon terrarium (10" w x 12" t x 20" l). Full sized adult Blue-tongue Skinks should be kept in 40 to 55-gallon terrariums (16" w x 16" t x 36" l or larger). All Blue-tongued Skinks, both juveniles and adults, are best kept singly. You may be able to house females together, or a male and female pair, but observe them very closely. If they fight, you will need to move them into separate cages. Males should never be kept together as they will fight aggressively and can injure each other.

A mixture of 50% play sand and 50% peat moss, cypress mulch (avoid cedar or pine as these may cause long-term health issues), or indoor/outdoor carpeting can all be used as substrates. We feel that the soil mix substrate is more natural and the skinks seem to enjoy burying in the substrate. Care should be taken that they do not ingest this substrate when they eat. This can be accomplished by feeding them off of plastic trays or feeding them outside of their enclosure.

Blue-tongued Skinks are ground dwellers and do not require many rocks or branches for climbing. A hide box should be provided for the animal and a portion of the enclosure should be maintained with slightly damp substrate such as sphagnum moss to provide a humidity chamber to help with shedding. Placing clumps of damp moss under the shelter works well.

Heating and Lighting Blue-Tongued Skinks

A temperature gradient of 75° to 85° F should be established with a basking area of 90° to 95° F during the day. Temperatures can fall into the 65° to 70° F range at night with no health concerns.

Temperatures can be maintained with basking bulbs, infrared heat bulbs, and ceramic emitters or under tank heaters and panels. Hot rocks should never be used due to the high risk of burns that can be inflicted on the Blue-tongue Skink from malfunctioning heat rocks. As with most diurnal species full spectrum light is required. This can be achieved by using special fluorescent bulbs or newer Active UV bulbs. Active UV bulbs also provide heat which may allow you to not have to provide additional heat sources.

Feeding Blue-Tongued Skinks

Blue-tongued Skinks are omnivorous (eating both plant and animal matter). Generally, a diet consisting of 60% animal and 40% plant matter will provide a healthy mix for your Blue-tongued Skink. There are a variety of excellent commercial Blue-tongued Skink diets on the market, but we use an "old school" diet consisting of:

- 1 cup of boiled chicken (cubed)
- 1 cup of beef heart (cubed)
- 2 cups of frozen mixed vegetables (peas, carrots, corn)
- 2 ripe bananas
- 1 sprinkle of calcium and multivitamin powder

This should be mashed or run through a food processor. It can be fed immediately or frozen in patties to thaw out and feed later.

Keepers also successfully keep skinks feeding them various greens, small amounts of high quality dog food, crickets, mealworms, and thawed pre-killed frozen mice. Fresh water should be provided daily.

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