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Leopard and Fat-tailed Gecko Care

INTRODUCTION

Geckos are very docile creatures that require straightforward care making them very popular pets. They grow up approximately 6 inches in length and live about 7-10 years in captivity.

HOUSING

Cage – Aquariums, Exo Terra enclosures, or plastic containers with a mesh top are commonly used for enclosures. Since geckos are terrestrial, a longer enclosure is preferable to a high one. Juvenile geckos can be housed in a 10 gallon enclosure. Adult geckos will require at least a 20 gallon enclosure.

Substrate – The substrate should be safe and easy to clean. Commonly used examples are paper towels, butcher paper, newspaper, Repti-Carpet, or Vinyl tile. Paper pulp products such as Carefresh can be used, but your gecko should be fed in a separate container to avoid ingestion of the substrate. We do not recommend using sand, gravel, mulch, or wood shavings due to risk of ingestion leading to intestinal blockage as well as irritation of the eyes and mouth.

Hide/Humidity Box – A hide box and a separate humidity box should be provided on the warm side of the enclosure. Geckos like to sleep in a dark snug enclosure. Half-logs (found at pet stores), cardboard boxes, or upside-down opaque plastic containers can be used. Make sure the hide box is large enough to fit the entire gecko. Humidity boxes can be made from a plastic Tupperware type container with a hole cut in one side for your gecko to enter. Make sure the cut edges are smooth. Damp sphagnum moss or a damp piece of foam/sponge can be placed in the container. The moss/foam/sponge can be rewet daily or as needed. The humidity box should be cleaned every two weeks and the moss replaced or the foam/sponge washed to prevent mold growth and waste build-up.

Cage Furniture – Furniture such as large rocks, branches, and driftwood can be provided as climbing structures for your gecko. Do NOT use heated rocks due to risk of thermal burns.

Temperature – The enclosure should be large enough that a temperature gradient, with a warm side and a cool side, can be created. This is important for allowing your gecko to control its own temperature by changing its location. Digital thermometers rather than dial thermometers should be used for accuracy. The probe of the digital thermometer should be placed at the level of the animal rather than at the top of the enclosure. At least two thermometers should be used, one to measure the cool side and one the warm side. The basking side should reach up to 92-95°F and the cooler side should be about 70-75°F. Reptile under tank heating pads are also often used as a heat source.

Lighting – While leopard and fat-tailed geckos are nocturnal and some literature states that they do not require special UV lighting, we still highly recommend providing UVB lighting as studies have shown that geckos exposed to UV lighting are generally healthier. We recommend the long tube fluorescent lights (ZooMed Reptisun). The light needs to be placed over a screen top (as plastic/glass blocks the emission) within 18 inches of your gecko. The light needs to be replaced every 6 months even if it still works as UVB production decreases over time.

Cagemates – Geckos should be housed individually to avoid fighting. If geckos are housed together, there should never be more than one male as they are very territorial and prone to fighting. Multiple hide boxes need to be provided if there are multiple geckos housed together and a large heating pad must be used to ensure all hide boxes are heated.

DIET

Insects – Insects should always be gut loaded. To do this, provide insects with a diet such as cricket food, rodent chow, or dry dog food. The primary insect used should be crickets or Dubia roaches as other insects (mealworms, giant mealworms, wax moth larvae) are high in fat and should only be used as treats. Please remove uneaten insects to prevent injury to your gecko.

Vegetables – Feed a variety of dark leafy vegetables, such as collard greens, endive, dandelion greens, mustard greens, escarole, watercress, and turnip greens. Dark leafy vegetables have high levels of calcium and may be used instead of oral calcium supplements.

Feeding Juveniles

Insects – Appropriately sized insects should be offered daily. The length of the insect should not be wider than the gecko's head.

Vegetables – Dark green leafy vegetables should be offered daily.

Supplements – *Supplements should not be used if your gecko is eating dark green leafy vegetables.* Dust insects with a calcium/vitamin D3 supplement (with no added phosphorus) and multivitamin 4-5 times a week. We recommend the Repashy Calcium Plus HyD powder.

Feeding Adults

Insects – Gut-loaded insects should be offered 2-3 times a week.

Vegetables – Dark green leafy vegetables should be offered 2-3 times a week.

Supplements – *Supplements should not be used if your gecko is eating dark green leafy vegetables.* Dust insects with a calcium/vitamin D3 supplement (with no added phosphorus) and multivitamin 2-3 times a week. We recommend the Repashy Calcium Plus HyD powder.

WATER

Water bowl – Provide a shallow water dish that your gecko can easily climb into. It should be large enough to fit the entire animal. Water should be changed daily.

Soaking – Soak your gecko in a shallow warm water bath for 15-20 minutes about 2-3 times a week. This will encourage your gecko to drink and improve shedding.

Misting – Mist your gecko and the enclosure once a day with a spray bottle.

HEALTH CARE

We recommend a complete physical exam, choanal culture, and fecal by an exotic animal veterinarian for all newly acquired pet geckos. Thereafter, we recommend exams every 6 months and choanal cultures and fecal exams every 12 months.

COMMON HEALTH PROBLEMS

Tail Dropping – If they feel threatened, geckos can drop their tail. A new tail will grow back within 1-2 months, but will look different than the original tail.

Abscess – Abscesses appear as firm lumps on your gecko. They will need to be lanced and some need to be surgically removed.

Retained Shed – Geckos shed in pieces and sometimes the shed can be retained. Common places for retained shed are in the eyes and around the legs, and toes. Signs include squinting or swelling of the leg or toes. If you notice any of these signs, please contact your veterinarian.