

Chameleon Care

Before You Purchase

As chameleons continue to grow in popularity, it is important to research the species you may be considering. There are many species that require different care. Their unique anatomical features are a big reason for their increase in popularity such as their rotating eyes, projectile tongues, fused toes, and laterally compressed bodies that can set them apart from other lizard species. A thorough understanding of the specific husbandry need, proper caging, lighting, temperature requirements, and nutritional needs are critical for chameleons to thrive. Also be sure to purchase responsibly by ensuring the pet is captive-bred and not wild-caught. Bred in captivity can ensure health and genetic lineage.

Chameleons are extremely fragile and notoriously difficult to maintain in captivity on a long-term basis. There is a direct correlation between enclosure design and time spent caring for these lizards and the success of the pet's health. Chameleons need to be observed daily for subtle changes in their behavior such as change in color, decreased appetite, decreased activity level, or their positioning in the cage. Successfully managing any medical condition requires that the problem be identified early. Once the chameleon becomes debilitated, the prognosis is usually grim. Waiting until the chameleons are visibly sick, as evidenced by dramatic weight loss, dehydration, and sunken eyes, usually results in limited success. Ensure that you have a veterinarian who is able to work with these animals before a problem arises.

Husbandry and Management

It can be difficult to maintain chameleons in captivity long term unless their environmental needs are adequately met. Improper temperature ranges, lighting, caging, hydration, or types and sizes of foot items can make it difficult to thrive. Poor husbandry also exacerbates or leads to extreme stress and, subsequently, infections and diseases. In order to properly evaluate current husbandry techniques and to set up an ideal environment, you must be aware of the needs of the particular chameleon species you are interested in having. Husbandry requirements differ dramatically between species.

Attached will be general care information for three of the more commonly purchased chameleons including: Veiled, Jackson's, and Panther. Again, further research is **necessary** to ensure quality care to these animals.

Caging

Chameleons should be kept in a large cage with plenty of ventilation and different sized branches and plants for climbing and hiding. Occasionally, they can be out of their enclosure "free" but confined to large potted plants strictly monitored for additional enrichment. Screening is the preferred caging material, but sharp edges must be eliminated. Use plastic-coated screening or PVC mesh rather than metal screening. A variety of plants such as ficus and pothos should be provided. Particulate substrates, such as sand and gravel, are not recommended because they may be accidentally ingested and cause impaction or other health concerns. Newspaper or topsoil can be used as substrate. It is always important to ensure enclosure cleanliness for any reptile. Clean and disinfect the habitat weekly (including bowls and decor). Scrub with a 3% bleach solution and then rinse with water, removing all traces of the bleach so your chameleon will not be harmed. Then allow the enclosure to dry out completely before letting your chameleon back inside. Chameleons will regularly shed their skin, so provide a small box with sphagnum moss to help with the shedding process.

Chameleons should be housed **separately/individually** and with visual barriers if other enclosures are nearby due to territorial behaviors. Housed together or seeing another chameleon can stress the animals.

Veiled Chameleons

About

Veiled chameleons are indigenous to Yemen, in the southwestern region of the Saudi Arabian peninsula. This species is found in extreme environments ranging from arid desert to seasonal streams after rain. This species of chameleon varies in color and size based on gender. Males are brightly colored, ranging from green to blue-green to yellow, and have a tall casque on top of their heads. Males can reach 18-24 inches in length and live on average 4-7 years. Females are usually green in color with minimal to no casque. Females do not get quite as large as males and average about 14-18 inches. Average lifespan for the females are 3-5 years.

Enclosure

Caging: Minimum cage size is 2x2x3 feet but much larger is highly recommended. Plastic-coated wire welded mesh vertical enclosures are preferred. (Metal wire can rust with the frequent misting habits.) Multiple branches and vines should be offered at different elevations throughout the enclosure. Multiple reptile safe plants, live or fake, to allow the pet to hide and drink water that accumulates on the leaves should be offered throughout the cage as well.

- **Temperature:** There should be a temperature gradient throughout the vertical enclosure ranging from 70°F at the bottom of the cage to at most 90°F at the top/nearest the heat source for daytime heat cycles. For nighttime temperatures, decrease about 10-15°F. It is beneficial to have at least 2 thermometers in the habitat. One near the heat source and one at the bottom of the cage where it should be kept cooler.
- **Humidity:** Maintain 40-60% humidity. It is recommended to have an automatic misting/watering system for throughout the day humidity care. A hygrometer should be in the enclosure to properly monitor the levels. Remember that chameleons do not usually drink from a bowl/water container, but usually prefer to drink droplets off objects in the enclosure. It is still ideal to place a shallow bowl of water in the enclosure. It is imperative to their health to mist regularly.
- **Lighting:** Chameleons need two types of bulbs: heat and ultraviolet (UVB) to ensure proper calcium absorption. There are different types of UVB bulbs so be sure to research which bulb you need for your enclosure set up. Be sure to maintain a standard day/night cycle: allowing light in between 12-14 hours a day and having a nighttime setting for the remaining. Do not provide heat rocks, red lighting, heat mats, or other products like these in or on the enclosure. Heat rocks and mats can cause burns and red lighting is still visible and can disrupt the pet's nighttime cycle.

Diet

Chameleons are insectivores and prefer a diet consisting of gut-loaded insects such as crickets, mealworms, superworms, waxworms, grasshoppers, silkworms, varying roach species. Be sure to give an appropriately sized food source for your chameleon (ex: grasshoppers and superworms are quite large and should only be fed to adults of a decent size). Other food items can also include varying blossoms and leaves of certain plants. Hibiscus, dandelion, ficus, and romaine are good to start. Please research if the plant is safe to feed before offering to your pet or putting it in its enclosure.

Food items should also be dusted with calcium **without** vitamin D and low/no phosphorus. A vitamin/mineral supplement can also be used once a week in the food.

Jackson's Chameleon

About

Jackson's chameleons are indigenous to Africa, specifically near Kenya. There are a few types of Jackson's chameleon, but the most common of the pet trade would be the *C.j. xantholophus* also known as the yellow-crested Jackson's chameleon. They measure approximately 9 to 13 inches from snout to tail. Male Jackson's chameleons have three horns, and the adults are generally larger than females. Female Jackson's chameleons have no horns or just one diminished horn, and are generally smaller. Males' average lifespan is 8 to 10 years. Females live approximately 4 to 5 years, and can diminish the more frequently they breed. The Jackson's chameleon is one of the few species that are live-bearing instead of egg-laying. With the stresses of breeding, it is highly recommended to house these animals individually.

Enclosure

Caging: Minimum cage size is 2x2x3 feet but much larger is highly recommended. Plastic-coated wire welded mesh vertical enclosures are preferred. (Metal wire can rust with the frequent misting habits.) Multiple branches and vines should be offered at different elevations throughout the enclosure. Multiple reptile safe plants, live or fake, to allow the pet to hide and drink water that accumulates on the leaves should be offered throughout the cage as well.

- **Temperature:** There should be a temperature gradient throughout the vertical enclosure ranging from 70°F at the bottom of the cage to at most 80°F at the top/nearest the heat source for daytime heat cycles. For nighttime temperatures, decrease to 60°F to 70°. It is beneficial to have at least 2 thermometers in the habitat. One near the heat source and one at the bottom of the cage where it should be kept cooler.
- **Humidity:** Maintain 60-100% humidity. It is recommended to have an automatic misting/watering system for throughout the day humidity care. A hygrometer should be in the enclosure to properly monitor the levels. Remember that chameleons do not usually drink from a bowl/water container, but usually prefer to drink droplets off objects in the enclosure. It is still ideal to place a shallow bowl of water in the enclosure. It is imperative to their health to mist regularly. Use of a cool-mist humidifier may also be necessary.
- **Lighting:** Chameleons need two types of bulbs: heat and ultraviolet (UVB) to ensure proper calcium absorption. There are different types of UVB bulbs so be sure to research which bulb you need for your enclosure set up. Be sure to maintain a standard day/night cycle: allowing light in between 12-14 hours a day and having a nighttime setting for the remaining. Do not provide heat rocks, red lighting, heat mats, or other products like these in or on the enclosure. Heat rocks and mats can cause burns and red lighting is still visible and can disrupt the pet's nighttime cycle.

Diet

The Jackson's chameleons are insectivores and should be provided with a variety of gut-loaded insects such as crickets, wax worms, butter worms, cockroaches, and small reptile-safe snails. Food items should not be larger than the space between the animal's eyes. Food items should also be dusted with calcium without vitamin D and low/no phosphorus. A vitamin/mineral supplement can also be used about once a week to the food.

Panther Chameleon

About

Native to Madagascar, panther chameleons are one of the most colorful chameleon species available. Males can range from 12-18 inches long and females 10-14 inches. Average lifespan for good conditions are 2-7 years depending on gender. These chameleons tend to be one of the more docile types; however, it is important to remember that all chameleons should not be handled regularly as they like to be left alone.

Enclosure

- **Caging:** Minimum cage size is 2x2x3 feet but much larger is highly recommended. Plastic-coated wire welded mesh vertical enclosures are preferred. (Metal wire can rust with the frequent misting habits.) Multiple branches and vines should be offered at different elevations throughout the enclosure. Multiple reptile safe plants, live or fake, to allow the pet to hide and drink water that accumulates on the leaves should be offered throughout the cage as well.
- **Lighting:** There should be a temperature gradient throughout the vertical enclosure ranging from 75°F at the bottom of the cage to at most 90°F at the top/nearest the heat source for daytime heat cycles. For nighttime temperatures, decrease to 60°F to 70°. It is beneficial to have at least 2 thermometers in the habitat. One near the heat source and one at the cooler bottom.
- **Humidity:** Maintain 60-70% humidity. It is recommended to have an automatic misting/watering system for throughout the day humidity care. A hygrometer should be in the enclosure to properly monitor the levels. Remember that chameleons do not usually drink from a bowl/water container, but usually prefer to drink droplets off objects in the enclosure. It is still ideal to place a shallow bowl of water in the enclosure. It is imperative to their health to mist regularly. Use of a cool-mist humidifier may also be necessary.
- **Lighting:** Chameleons need two types of bulbs: heat and ultraviolet (UVB) to ensure proper calcium absorption. There are different types of UVB bulbs so be sure to research which bulb you need for your enclosure set up. Be sure to maintain a standard day/night cycle: allowing light in between 12-14 hours a day and having a nighttime setting for the remaining. Do not provide heat rocks, red lighting, heat mats, or other products like these in or on the enclosure. Heat rocks and mats can cause burns and red lighting is still visible and can disrupt the pet's nighttime cycle.

Diet

Panther chameleons are insectivores and should be provided with a variety of gut-loaded insects such as crickets, wax worms, butter worms, and cockroaches. Food items should not be larger than the space between the animal's eyes. Food items should also be dusted with calcium with vitamin D and low/no phosphorus. A vitamin/mineral supplement can also be used about once a week to the food.