

Care of the Chinese Water Dragon

Chinese or Green water dragons (*Physignathus cocincinus*) are tree-living, semi-aquatic lizards native to the tropical rainforests of Southeast Asia. Chinese water dragons are green with slanted stripes running along their sides.

Males can be differentiated from females by their larger heads and jowls, the crest on the back of their necks, as well as their larger size. Males typically reach three feet in length while females are smaller at approximately 2 feet. The tail makes up 70% to 75% of an adult dragon's length in both males and females. This tail, and is used for leverage and balance while climbing and swimming, as well as a defense mechanism against predators.

When properly cared for, water dragons may live 12-15 years. Sexual maturity occurs when the dragons exceeds 16 in (40 cm) at approximately 2-3 years of age.

DIET

Young green water dragons are primarily carnivorous reptiles that consume a variety of insects and rodents. As water dragons age, they become more omnivorous. Many captive dragons will also eat fruits and vegetables, but produce should comprise only a small portion of the diet. Feed juveniles daily; feed adults every 2 to 3 days.

Protein sources

- Feed Water dragons a variety of gut-loaded insects such as crickets, king mealworms, silkworms, and waxworms, as well as grasshoppers, roaches, and earthworms.
- Pinky mice and small fish may also be fed occasionally.

Produce

All produce offered should be fresh, high quality items fit for human consumption and pesticide free. Offer chopped fruits, greens, and other vegetables.

- Dark, leafy greens such as mustard, kale, dandelion and collard greens should make up the bulk of the vegetable mix, as they are an excellent source of calcium.
- Peas, green beans, corn, squash, carrots, sweet potato, cucumber, zucchini, green peppers and parsley can also be added.
- Offer adult dragons coarsely chopped, salad; juveniles prefer finely chopped greens.

Fruit should make up no more than 5% to 10% of the diet.

Vitamin/Mineral Supplementation

- Offer “gut loaded” insects or insects fed high calcium diets for several days before being fed to your pet. This calcium-rich diet may include a commercial cricket diet (like Fluker's cricket food), grain (such as whole oatmeal, bran) or a high protein baby cereal mixed with reptile vitamins, and/or dark leafy greens. Cat or dog food may also be used however this probably adds more fat to your dragon's diet than it needs.

- Lightly dust the non-breeding adult's diet with a calcium carbonate or calcium gluconate supplement just prior to feeding once weekly.
- Calcium supplements should be devoid or low in phosphorus with a minimum calcium:phosphorus ratio of 2:1. Avoid products containing vitamin D as this can lead to toxicity.
- A reptile multi-vitamin may be offered once weekly.

Water

Your dragon requires fresh water daily. Green water dragons require a large bathing area that allows easy access. Dragons will often soak and defecate in their water bath so clean water dishes at least once daily.

HOUSING

Green water dragons are large lizards that require large enclosures. At minimum, provide this active lizard with a 75-gallon (283-L) terrarium. The enclosure should be at least 6 ft x 3 ft x 7 ft (1.8 x 1 m x 2 m). Water dragons may be housed alone, in pairs, or as trios.

Tanks must be well ventilated, yet able to retain heat, and provide a top to prevent escape. The tops must be sturdy enough to hold heating and lighting elements, and made of a screen type mesh.

Cage substrate

- Newspaper, butcher paper, and reptile carpeting (i.e. Astroturf) are inexpensive, readily available, and easy to change.
- Reptile bark and non-aromatic mulch are moderately absorbent and provide a burrowing material, however these products trap moisture and must be changed frequently to prevent overgrowth of bacteria and fungi.
- Avoid sand, gravel or corncob bedding because they may cause gastrointestinal blockage if ingested. Corncob, moss and alfalfa pellets are also prone to hold moisture and promote bacterial growth. Wood shavings such as pine and cedar can predispose to skin and respiratory infections.

Change newspaper every couple of days. Wash reptile carpet every couple of days, and keep multiple pieces since the carpet must be completely dry when placed in the enclosure. Completely change bark or mulch monthly; spot cleanings should be performed regularly near the water dish and in latrine areas.

Heat

Proper temperature is very important. During the day, cage temperature should range from 80-86°F (27-30°C) with a basking spot that reaches 95°F (35°C). Provide a 10-15°F (5-8°C) temperature drop at night to 70-77°F (21-25°C).

- An under tank heating unit with a heat lamp works well in the basking area to achieve the correct temperature gradient.
- Avoid electric "hot rocks" since these items can short circuit causing serious burns.
- Place thermometers at both ends of the cage.

Lighting

Ultraviolet light is needed for normal absorption of dietary calcium.

- Provide a synthetic ultraviolet light source for your dragon. Be sure to choose a bulb specifically designed for reptile use that emits light in the UVB range of 290-320 nm.
- Ultraviolet rays are filtered by glass and plastic therefore natural light and artificial light must not pass through glass or plastic.
- The UVB spectrum generally degrades after about 6 months; therefore bulbs should be replaced every 6 months.

Consider exposing your pet to direct sunlight when outside temperatures exceed 75-80°F (24-27°C). Keep your dragon in a wire or screened enclosure that provides a shaded area, and monitor your pet closely since overheating is a danger in the hot summer sun.

Cage furniture

- This arboreal species requires sturdy branches and various levels of stacking rocks for climbing. Rocks should be large and smooth edged to help keep nails in wear as well as allow for easy cleaning. Limestone slabs and river rocks work nicely.
- Provide hiding places at both ends of the enclosure. Cardboard boxes with a cut-out hole, pieces of large rounded cork, large enclosed cat litter boxes, or commercially available reptile hide boxes can all work well depending on the size of your dragon.
- When including plant remember that a much larger enclosure is required. Most individuals will attempt to climb and eat any new plant life introduced so select items known to be safe for use with water dragons such as *Pothos*, *Dracena*e, hibiscus, philodendrons, spider plants, epiphytes such as staghorn ferns, and certain bromoloids. Make sure all plants are pesticide free, and use a sterile potting soil for planting.
- Provide hiding places in sufficient numbers and in various locations so that all animals have opportunities to hide from other lizards and humans.

HANDLING & RESTRAINT

Known for their engaging personality, water dragons can be tamed with frequent, gentle handling.

- Begin by allowing your water dragon to explore and discover your scent.
- Like most lizards, water dragons are wary of fast movements, so avoid any sudden movements.
- Lizards are also wary when approached from above.

Once you are able to hold your dragon, use two hands to hold him, supporting the chest and pelvic region. Gently cup the animal with your hand: the water dragon would rather hold on to you than have you hold on to it. Beware that dragons are lively and will often try to jump, even if you are holding them a few feet above the ground.

Cautions:

- Do not grasp your dragon by the tail since the tail can break off.
- Dragon nails can become overly sharp and painful, so keep nails trimmed. Nail trims often require the use of two people well versed in reptile restraint to prevent injury to the animal or handlers.
- Frightened dragons can and will bite.
- Also never handle your dragon after handling its prey without first washing your hands, the scent can confuse them and can lead to injury.