



CONCISE CARE SHEETS

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HELMETED G E C K O

INTRO

The Helmeted Gecko was long known as *Geckonia chazaliae*, but now is reclassified as *Tarentola chazaliae*. This terrestrial species gets its common name from the prominent ridge of enlarged pointed scales at the back of its head. Combined with their large eyes this gives them a very unique appearance that matches their bold and charming "personality". A small gecko that only reaches about three or four inches and is relatively short-tailed, these little lizards are rarely shy and will often come to take food from the hand. Helmeted Geckos, like many geckos, are capable of vocalizations, and *T. chazaliae* emits an odd sound that matches its attitude and appearance.

Helmeted geckos are native to the arid, rocky lands of northwestern Africa and is particularly well-known from the coastal deserts of southern Morocco. Here it lives under rocks and other ground cover and debris that creates a micro-climate that is cooler and more humid than the arid land it inhabits. There is little rainfall, but coastal winds bring fog that condenses and gives this desert lizard some moisture.

GENERAL CARE & FEEDING

Like most geckos, Helmeted Geckos are usually best housed alone, but many keepers report great success keeping them in groups if there is only one male per group. Keepers who wish to produce offspring may consider keeping a male and one or two females together year-round. A ten gallon tank or similarly sized terrarium such as those made by ExoTerra and ZooMed is adequate housing for several adults. See HOUSING section below for information on terrarium set-up.

Helmeted Geckos are very aggressive feeders that typically attack prey as soon as it is introduced to their enclosures and often surprise their keepers with their huge appetites. They are insectivorous and will typically consume more food than you might expect based on its small size. Breeding females should particularly be offered as much food as they will eat. Helmeted Geckos thrive on appropriately-sized (width of gecko head) crickets, dubia roaches and mealworms. Crickets and/or roaches should be gut-loaded with nutritious foods for twenty-four hours prior to being offered as prey and should be coated with a quality reptile calcium supplement at each feeding. Black soldier fly larvae (aka ReptiWorms™ or Phoenix Worms®), waxworms, and butterworms may also be offered to provide beneficial variety to the diet.

As noted above, Helmeted Geckos take advantage of the cooler and more humid micro-climate found beneath rocks in the harsh environment of their coastal habitat. Frequent fog cover provides them with essential humidity. Successful keeping of this species requires giving them more moisture than you would expect a desert lizard would need. Many breeders of this species mist their gecko enclosures with lukewarm water once a day and also heavily spray the cooler end of the terrarium weekly to ensure elevated humidity. This added humidity is essential, but ventilation should always be excellent so that the cage does not become damp and dries within an hour or two after daily misting.

HOUSING

A ten gallon tank or terrarium of similar size is adequate for pair or trio of Helmeted Geckos. Something along the lines of ExoTerra's 18x18x12 glass terrarium can be used to make a larger attractive home and may house several adults. Although this is a terrestrial species, it can climb glass and a secure lid is necessary not only to keep the lizards in, but also to keep pets like cats and pests out.

Reptile sand makes a fine substrate, but a 50/50 mix of peat moss and playbox sand may also be used. Helmeted Geckos can be active and will explore their enclosure so rocks and branches both add beauty and give the geckos interesting terrain to utilize. Rock caves and such make for essential natural retreats, but a plastic container containing damp moss will make for a better hiding place that provides a cooler, humid micro-climate. It can be hidden by rocks to maintain the naturalistic aesthetic of the terrarium, but care should always be exercised to ensure that rocks cannot topple and injure the gecko(s).

QUICK TIPS

- » Use undertank heater to create a thermal gradient where one end of the enclosure reaches 85-90°F while the cooler, unheated end is 75-80°F. Humidity 60-75%.
- » Hydration is key to keeping. See GENERAL CARE & FEEDING section for notes.
- » Eats insects. Thrives on crickets and dubia roaches.
- » Active at night.

Undertank heat mats are best for creating the warm temperatures and thermal gradient that Helmeted Geckos require. The "hot" end of the enclosure should be 85-90F during the day while the cooler (and moister) opposite end should be in the 75-80F range. The heater can be controlled with a timer so that the tank drops to room temperature at night and a reptile thermostat is always recommended for safely controlling heat sources.

Since Helmeted Geckos are nocturnal, they don't require the UV exposure that many pet lizards do and a simple fluorescent light can be used to illuminate the terrarium so its beauty can be enjoyed during the day. This is especially important if you choose to decorate the terrarium with any live plants. Any lighting should be controlled by a timer to ensure that these nocturnal geckos get at least twelve hours of darkness. Some keepers may choose to add a terrarium fixture with a low-wattage red bulb to aid in viewing these geckos at night when they are most active. There are, however, some keepers who believe that UV exposure is beneficial for young Helmeted Geckos so you may consider using a reptile fluorescent bulb with UVA/UVB during the daytime.

HOUSING YOUNG HELMETED GECKOS

A plastic shoe box with ventilation holes added by drilling or melting with a soldering iron is a fine rearing container for young Helmeted Geckos. A layer of paper toweling is all that is needed for substrate, and this allows for convenient and frequent cage cleanings that will benefit the young geckos health. It also removes the risk of substrate ingestion. An opaque plastic container like an empty spreadable cream cheese tub can be used to make a simple retreat. It should have an entrance hole cut in the side that is large enough for the gecko, but small enough that it keeps out as much light as possible and makes for a secure retreat. Damp sphagnum moss should be placed inside and kept moist so that the gecko has sufficient humidity in its retreat, but be sure that ventilation is adequate so that the enclosure itself does not become damp.

HEALTH

Helmeted Geckos are hardy lizards that are easy to raise if their basic care and environmental parameters are met. The greatest health concern is with breeding females who must be fed well and often and receive sufficient calcium supplementation to prevent issues.

SEXING HELMETED GECKOS

Although the presence of pores in males may even be determined in hatchlings by viewing the underside of the legs and vent with a magnifying loupe, it is easy to make a mistake with these small lizards using this method. At about six months of age, maturity will be reached and males will have obvious hemipenal bulges in the base of the tail.