

Keeping and Breeding Jeweled Lacertas (Timon lepidus)

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Introduction

The Jeweled lacerta, also known as the Ocellated or Eyed lizard, is a medium sized lizard native to southwestern Europe. If I were only able to keep and breed one species of lizard they would be it. They have so much going for them: hardy, active, prolific, not too big or small, colorful, interesting social behaviors, and intelligence. It's hard for me to pick another lizard that has all of these positive attributes.

Adult males can get up to two feet in length but about half of that length is tail. Males also have heavier bodies and heads with impressive jaw structure. Females tend to be several inches shorter in length and much less heavy bodied. Both males and females are bright green with vibrant blue ocelli covering their flanks. Males do tend to have larger and brighter ocelli than females. Adult males can also be determined by examining the vent. They will have pronounced hemipenial bulges and femoral pores. Females also have femoral pores but they are more reduced.



They are not as simple to care for as a crested gecko or blue tongue skink but they make a perfect second lizard in my opinion. I have seen this species kept in many different ways, what follows is how I do it. I have had good success keeping and breeding them for years in this way. I hope that it is helpful and that more people start keeping and breeding this amazing species of lacertid!

Housing

I house my adult lacertas in terraria that are three feet long, two feet deep, and sixteen inches tall. Of course you can keep them in something larger as they are active lizards but I do not recommend that they be kept in enclosures smaller than three feet long.

The enclosure should have rocky outcrops that the lizards can crawl on top of to bask as well as crevices to hide in.



Make sure that all heavy rocks are very secure as these lizards are active diggers and will dislodge anything not securely placed. I also add thick branches throughout the enclosure so that they may utilize as much of the enclosure volume as possible.

As mentioned they are active diggers and I provide them with several inches of sandy soil. In addition I also provide a large (12"x6"x4") plastic container with damp soil inside. I keep the lid on the container and cut a hole large enough for the lizards to get inside. This provides a cool and damp retreat that they will utilize regularly. This is also where the females will lay their eggs.

I usually keep my adults as male-female pairs year round. One male and several females can also be kept together but never two males. If you are keeping several together be observant for bullying and separate them if necessary.

In general they are not reclusive animals and spend the majority of their time out and about in their enclosure. I always enjoy watching them as they are very active and inquisitive animals that always seem to be up to something.

Heating and Lighting

Since they come from Europe Jeweled lacertas are adapted to a wide range of climatic conditions depending on the time of the year. For half the year I have the lights on for fourteen hours during the day. During this time I provide them with strong UV light in the form of a Reptisun 10.0 linear bulb or a MegaRay mercury vapor bulb. If I am using a fluorescent light for UV then I also provide a halogen flood heat bulb for a hot spot. The mercury vapor bulb provides both heat and UV light. In addition I often use 6500K LED strip lights to provide extra lighting as these lizards thrive under bright light. High quality light and strong UV are essential to get your lacertas to show their brightest colors.

They like it hot! The basking spot should be 100-120 F. The heat lamp should be on one side of the enclosure so that the other side is cooler (70-80 F).

In the spring and fall I reduce the photoperiod to ten hours of light and keep the heat lamp on during this time. Around the middle of november I will stop feeding the lacertas for one week in preparation for winter brumation (a time of dormancy). After one week of not feeding I will turn the heat light off and reduce the photoperiod to eight hours of light. After one week of this I will then move the lacertas to a hibernaculum. In my old home I would put them in a large plastic storage tote with six inches of soil and put them in my unheated basement. In my new home my basement is finished and heated so I instead place the lacertas into individual plastic containers then put those into a wine cooler that has been set to 50 F. The plastic containers have a few inches of soil in the bottom and several ventilation holes in the sides and lid. The lacertas will go dormant in these cool conditions and I will keep them there for two months (December and January). During this time I will check on them every two weeks to make sure they aren't losing weight and look healthy. They do not eat or drink during this time.

After the two month brumation I will remove the lacertas from the wine cooler and put them back in their normal enclosures. I will not add use a heat light or feed them for the first week. I will then turn on the heat light and start to offer food a few days later.

It is not necessary to brumate the lacertas during the winter but it is natural to do so and is probably beneficial for long term health so I do recommend it, especially for breeding. More on that later.

Diet, Nutrition, and Water

Jeweled lacertas are omnivores, eating both plant and animal matter, but they are primarily insectivores (insect eating). My staple feeders for the lacertas are crickets, superworms, mealworms, and dubia roaches. I also occasionally give them fruit as a treat such as grapes, bananas, figs, and blueberries. I will also occasionally offer Pangea gecko diet as well as cat food. Another good treat to offer occasionally is pinky mice. Most feedings should be insects though.

In order to get your lacertas showing their brightest greens and blues you will need to gut load your insects very well on fresh greens, veggies, and fruits. My typical insect food includes kale, collard greens, lettuce, carrots, sweet potatoes, zucchini, red and green peppers, and various fruits. In addition to gut loading the feeder insects I also cover them in Repashy Calcium Plus supplement at every feeding.

I feed adult, juvenile, and baby Jeweled lacertas every other day as much as they will eat. They have a voracious appetite and will put away a lot of food. I have not experienced obesity in these lizards so I let them eat their fill.

Water is simply provided in a small shallow bowl. They don't drink often but they will occasionally so I always have a bowl of fresh water in with them.

Outdoor Keeping

Many lacerta keepers, especially those from Europe, will keep their lizards outside whenever the weather allows. As long as you live in an area that meets their basic requirements I highly recommend it. Even here in Pennsylvania I can keep my lacertas outside for five months out of the year.

You will need to have a secure enclosure that prevents the lacertas from escaping as well as predators from entering. My outdoor lacerta enclosures are made of pressure treated 2x4's and ½" hardware cloth. Every side of the enclosure, including the bottom, needs to be covered in the hardware cloth to ensure the lizards can't dig out. I will bury the bottom portion of the enclosure in the ground at least six inches. Include an area in the enclosure that is fully sheltered from the elements. Other than that care for them outdoors as you would indoors.



Handling and Socialization

One of my favorite aspects of working with jeweled lacertas is interacting with them. They are highly intelligent animals that quickly recognize their keeper and can develop trusting relationships. A key to developing such a rewarding relationship with your lacerta is to interact with it whenever you feed it and don't force handling right away. Lacertas are very food motivated animals and I use feeding time as socialization interactions. I will often hold the food in my hand and be very still and hopefully the lacerta will come to get the food. After several interactions like this the lacerta usually understands that I am the source of food and will start "begging" when I am observing them. For handling, try to get the animal to crawl on to you. Even a calm lizard will become stressed and may bite if it is physically restrained and held. I have several lacertas that will crawl right onto my hand and up and down my arms. The more you work with your lacerta the more it will become accustomed to you. If you want a "pet" lacerta I recommend you get a baby or juvenile and raise it yourself. Another important

thing to keep in mind is that every lacerta is an individual. Some are calmer and some are more shy. However, every lacerta I have raised tolerates or seeks out interactions with me.

Breeding and Raising Young

If you want to breed your lacertas you will of course need an adult male and female. You will also need to brumate them during the winter. This gets them “in the mood” in the spring. Not long after turning the heat lights back on in the spring the male will often be seen chasing the female around the enclosure followed by regular matings. These matings can sometimes be very rough as the male gains a hold on the female with his mouth. Usually this is not a cause for concern as the female only ends up with some scuff marks. In some cases a female will lose a tail (it will regenerate). If you start to notice that the male is continuing to chase the female and she is very clearly trying to escape him you may need to separate them for a while to give her a break, it all depends on how aggressive the individual male is.



During the spring and summer the females will often lay a clutch every month of around six to fifteen eggs making them very prolific lizards. The female will bury her eggs in the aforementioned container of damp soil kept in the enclosure. An interesting observation that I have made is that the male often seems to “stand guard” over the female as she is laying her eggs. I can’t say for certain that is what he’s doing it but I’ve seen it enough times with several males to make me believe he is being protective.



I incubate the eggs in vermiculite or perlite in a 1:1 ratio of substrate and filtered water which goes into a plastic container with one tiny hole in the lid. When laid the eggs often stick together. Do not try to separate them. I will half bury the eggs in the incubation media and then leave them alone for the duration of incubation. I incubate at around 80-82 F with a slight night time drop in temperature. Under these conditions the eggs usually hatch after three months.



Babies can be raised with their siblings and should be kept exactly like the adults. I tend to feed them every other day but you can also feed daily to achieve maximum growth. In my experience the babies are very hardy and grow quickly with little to no mortality. The babies start off more brown than green but will develop their greens and blues as quickly as six months old. Sexual maturity can be reached as quickly as one year but full adult size usually takes at least two years.



Final Thoughts

While their care and breeding is a bit more involved than a beginner lizard such as a crested gecko, Jeweled lacertas are still hardy and very rewarding lizards to keep. They possess all of the intelligence and interesting behaviors of large monitors in a much smaller and more manageable package. Couple that with their beautiful green and blue coloration and you have a show stopping animal that will impress both beginner and advanced keepers.

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