

Keeping and Breeding Northern Blue Tongue Skinks (*Tiliqua scincoides intermedia*)

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Introduction

At twelve years old I got my first blue tongue skink. While I had other reptile pets before, that skink was the first one that I personally researched and prepared well in advance of acquiring. I didn't know it at the time but that one lizard started a love for this particular species that would last a lifetime. When I got that skink he was an adult and I was told by the pet store employee that he was two years old. Over the next twenty-four years that lizard, Sneezer (remember I was twelve when I got him...), was my constant companion, teaching me much of what I know about reptile husbandry. Along the way I made many mistakes and gained insight into the needs of this species. Blue tongues were the first species of reptile that I bred and I have always had at least one of them for over twenty-five years.

Since I was twelve I have worked with hundreds of different species of reptile and amphibian, common and rare, and I can say, in my opinion of course, that northern blue tongue skinks are the best "pet" reptile you can have. By pet I mean an animal that you (and your children) can interact with daily and whose care is not demanding or expensive. They are incredibly hardy lizards and are very tolerant and forgiving of a beginner's mistakes.

Blue tongue skinks are a group of lizards that are native to Australia, Tasmania, New Guinea, and Indonesia. This article and my own experience are limited to focusing on one particular subspecies: the Northern blue tongue skink (*Tiliqua scincoides intermedia*). This is the largest (debatably second longest) of the blue tongue skinks and the heaviest of all blue tongues. Adults range from 18-25 inches and can generally weigh 600-1000 grams. The northern subspecies only come from Australia, you guessed it...the north. Their range is rather large and can be found in a variety of habitats from forest to harsh scrub land. The great thing about this is that they are very tolerant of a wide range of conditions making them excellent pets!

Housing

As I've already mentioned their care isn't expensive or elaborate but please keep in mind that caring for *any* pet isn't cheap if you are doing it well. If there is one downside to keeping blueys it's that they do require spacious housing compared to other beginner lizards. I recommend that adult blue tongues be kept in an enclosure that is a minimum of 48" long by 18" wide by 18" tall. If you are able to provide a larger enclosure please do so as they can be active lizards and will utilize all of the space that you give them. Even if you are buying a baby blue tongue I recommend you buy the permanent adult enclosure. The baby will be fine in that size and it will save you money in the long run. Even better, have your enclosure set up and ready to go before buying a baby (or adult)!

I prefer to use PVC (or other plastic) enclosures as the opaque sides provide security and hold heat well. The interior of the enclosure can be very simple. If you are looking for a beautifully planted enclosure blue tongues are not for you. They will dig and bulldoze over live plants, killing most of them. You can still make your enclosure aesthetically pleasing by adding natural wood and rocks though.

Another thing to mention is that the majority of breeders of blue tongue skinks keep their animals in snake racks, particularly the Vision V70 tub. Keeping blue tongues in racks can be a bit of a hot button issue. I will lay out my own experiences and preferences regarding it based on many years of keeping them in a variety of ways. First off I will say that I have kept adult skinks in V70 tubs in the past and I do raise all of the babies I produce in tubs. In terms of breeding it is not very realistic to keep every baby in its own terrarium. Tubs and racks provide a very practical way of temporarily housing large numbers of babies. Many breeders also keep their adult skinks in racks for the same reason, to save space. In my opinion it is unethical to keep a diurnal (awake during the day) animal of this size in a small lightless tub. While blue tongues will live and breed in rack systems it is only a testament to the hardiness of the animal that they can do so, not to the efficacy of the rack itself. The base of a V70 tub is approximately 14"x 30". That is 420 square inches of usable floor space. The tub is just over 5 inches tall as well. A 48"x 24" enclosure has a usable floor space of 1,152 square inches. That is nearly three times the size of a V70 tub. Even a 24" x 24" enclosure has a usable floor space of 576 square inches which is nearly 1.5 times the floorspace of the v70 tub. Furthermore, it is impossible to properly light a diurnal animal in a rack system. These animals are specifically adapted for being active in the sunlight.

Over the years I have used many different types of substrate and I honestly keep going back and forth on which is my favorite. Cypress mulch and aspen shavings are my two favorites. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. Both are very easy to spot clean and produce minimal dust. Cypress mulch can also be moistened easily to increase humidity if needed. Aspen shavings should not be allowed to stay wet. Aspen shavings are lighter and cheaper than cypress mulch so it is easier to provide enough substrate for the skink to bury itself under (a requirement).

Besides the substrate there are a few other enclosure furnishings that I would consider necessary. First, a secure hide that the animal can fully enter should be provided. Cork flats are my favorite but you can also use large plastic drainage piping and commercially made reptile hides. Second, you should add something to the enclosure to help file the skink's nails down naturally as it travels around its enclosure. Bricks, rough rocks, and wood logs can be used. Last, give your skink something to climb around on. Logs and rock piles (make sure they are secure!) can be used throughout the enclosure for them to climb on and explore. While they are primarily terrestrial lizards they will climb much more than you might think. Just make sure all cage furnishings are sturdy and well secured so that your skink doesn't get hurt when digging and exploring.

Heating and Lighting

Heating your blue tongue and keeping it relatively dry is probably the most important aspect of keeping it healthy. Give it the heat it needs and you will have a healthy pet with little to no health issues for decades. If you don't give it the heat it needs then you are opening the door to a variety of health conditions such as respiratory infections. Luckily providing that much needed heat is pretty simple. There are two basic ways that heat can be supplied: a light or a heat tape/mat. A light is the preferred method of heating reptiles as it more accurately mimics natural basking.

A heat light should be placed on the outside of the enclosure, usually on top of a screen lid so that the animal can not come into contact with it. I recommend using a halogen flood light. It does not need to be one specifically made for reptiles. What wattage you use will depend upon the size of the enclosure, the amount of ventilation, and your home's ambient temperature. The light can be pointed at a large flat rock or cork slab to absorb and distribute the heat. The light should be placed on one end of the enclosure so as to create a heat gradient. This means that one side of the enclosure should be very warm, the other side cooler, and the middle in between. With this gradient set up the skink can choose what temperature it needs to be at throughout the day. The heat light (and any other lighting) should be turned off at night. As long as your house doesn't get below 60 F then no additional night time heat is needed.

Another possibility for heating is to use an under tank heating element such as Flexwatt heat tape. This works fine but you must have the heating element plugged into a thermostat. Heat tape or mats that aren't controlled by a reliable thermostat can cause damage to the enclosure and even possibly fire. Also, basking via heat tape is not as natural for a diurnal lizard.

Regardless of how you heat your enclosure you will need to provide your skink with a basking spot of at least 100 F. Anywhere from 100-120 F is good in my experience. Anything less than 100 F and your skink may not be able to digest its food properly and may develop respiratory illnesses. The cooler end of your enclosure should be between 70-80 F during the day. Dropping to normal house room temperatures at night is fine. All lighting should be turned off at night.

Your skink should also be provided with a UV (ultraviolet) light source. The best current technology to provide this is T5HO linear fluorescent bulbs. The brands that I use and recommend are Leap, Zoo Med, and Arcadia. All three brands are made in the same German factory to the same high standards. A 5.0 or 6.0 bulb is appropriate.

I have noticed a marked improvement in the coloration, activity, and health of my blue tongues when I switched to keeping them only using halogen flood lights for basking and T5HO for UV light compared to keeping them in a rack system.

Diet, Nutrition, and Water

Blue tongues are opportunistic omnivores by nature with the majority of their diet coming from animal sources and a smaller percentage coming from plant matter. I primarily feed my skinks a high quality canned dog food. I do not like to recommend just one brand as I like to regularly offer different brands and flavors to provide variety. Read the ingredient list. Look for ingredients that you would want to eat yourself and not just fillers. What brand you specifically get is not as important. You will also likely find that your skink has its own individual preferences as to what



type it likes. It is important to offer your skinks variety beyond the staple diet. Live insects, fresh fruits, and even small rodents can all be used in rotation. The bulk of the diet should be dog food as it is the easiest method of providing a balanced and nutritious diet.

I feed my baby skinks every other day. I believe that feeding every day can lead to an unnaturally fast growth rate and can lead to developmental issues. I feed my adults twice a week. When portioning out the food try to imagine the size of your skink's stomach and attempt to provide that much at each feeding. Overfeeding baby blue tongues can possibly lead to bloat and overfeeding adults can lead to obesity and the variety of health problems that come with it. I can not recommend an exact portion size as how much food your blue tongue will require will depend on a variety of factors such as age, size, and individual metabolism. You will probably find that your skink needs less food than you might think.

Blue tongues should be provided with fresh water at all times. Providing it is as simple as providing a bowl. When choosing a bowl make sure to get one that is heavy and sturdy so that the skink cannot easily knock it over when patrolling its enclosure. I recommend the stone crockware type bowls that are sold for dogs and small pets. Just make sure that the bowl isn't so high that the skink can access it easily. Change the water and clean the bowl at least twice a week or whenever it gets dirty. I use RO (reverse osmosis) filtered water for all of my animals but I have used tap water for years in the past without issue. Use your own judgment. If you wouldn't drink your tap water then don't give it to your animals.

Handling and Socialization

One of the best parts of keeping blue tongues is socializing with them. They are, in my opinion, the absolute best reptile in this regard. While many other species of reptile tolerate handling well, no other is as interactive and generally amiable as a captive bred northern. Blue tongues are relatively intelligent animals and each has their own personality and some are just more defensive than others. In general they do become very accustomed to handling and human interaction.

You shouldn't expect your skink to be friendly right from the beginning. Babies especially are wary of anything larger than themselves and their natural instinct is to defend themselves. If you started off with a baby blue tongue then you will need to invest time by working with it regularly for short periods. In the beginning keep the socialization sessions short (5-10 minutes) and only once a day. As your blue tongue gains confidence around you, handling sessions can be increased. I always say "you get what you put in". If you spend lots of time socializing your skink you will end up with a calm and friendly one. If you don't spend much time with it then it is just as likely to be fearful and shy around you.



A helpful tip when socializing your skink is to not approach from above. Moving objects from above equals predators to little skinks. Slowly move your hand toward the skink from the front or side. Be careful not to wiggle your fingers and present them as food!

With some patience and dedication you will soon have a very rewarding relationship with your skink that could last decades.

Breeding and Raising Young

In order to breed your skinks you will of course need to start out with an adult male-female pair. Sexing blue tongues is notoriously tricky. With experience it can become obvious but there are always individual skinks that are tough to pin down. In many cases I've determined the sex of my blue tongues by putting two of them together and seeing how they interact. But even that can be inconclusive as they just may not react the way we expect. Also, do not expect to be able to identify the gender of your skink until it is full grown. With all that said I will try to pin down some of the ways that you can determine the gender of your skinks.

Males tend to have wider heads and heavily muscled jowls. Females tend to have a much narrower and pointed face. Males tend to be more narrow and cylindrical in body shape. Females tend to be wider and flatter. Males will often leave sperm plugs so if you can spot those that can tell you you have a male as well. Probing is not reliable in this species.

In order to actually breed your skinks you will need to cycle them and subject them to a winter cooling period, often called brumation or hibernation. During the winter all heating elements are turned off and the photoperiod is reduced to eight hours. Before turning off the heat you should fast your skinks for two weeks to ensure that their digestive tracts are clear of food. I then leave the heat off for eight weeks. During this time the skinks will usually become much less active and probably will stay hidden. I always provide water for them as they will occasionally be up and about. Even if you don't plan to breed your skink I recommend that you put them through brumation as I believe it to be a natural and healthy rest period for them. Do not handle your skink unless necessary during this time.

After eight weeks I increase the photoperiod to ten to twelve hours and gradually increase the heat over one week. After a few days of heat at full levels you can start to feed them again. After they've had a few meals in them I will start to pair them. I will move one skink into the enclosure of the other (doesn't matter which) and observe. If a male is ready he will start to follow the female around. Quite often males are very aggressive in their mating and will quickly chase and bite the female. Do not be alarmed by the biting as the male will need to bite and hold on to the female in order to mate. The mating can be rough though so you should be there to



intervene if necessary. If a female is receptive she will allow the male to follow her around and bite her sides. If she is not ready to mate she will attack the male. If this happens you should separate them immediately and try again another day. Never leave skinks together unattended as fighting can lead to serious injury or even death.

Copulation usually only lasts a few minutes and you can separate the skinks after. I will pair skinks up three times (as long as the female allows) to ensure proper fertilization. Since mating can be rough on the females you can clean and disinfect any cuts or abrasions she may have endured during mating.

Pregnant blue tongues often eat like crazy and spend a lot of time on the hot spot. Make sure she has plenty of heat but you only need to feed her a little more than she normally eats. After three to four months the female will give live birth to her offspring. I have had litters as few as two and as many as twenty-one. When the babies come out their placenta comes with them. A healthy baby will break free from its protective sac and immediately eat the placenta. This provides a good first meal for the baby and is completely natural and

instinctual. Occasionally mother skinks will also pass unfertilized eggs often called “slugs”. They are round, yellow, and about an inch in diameter.

I separate the babies from mom as soon as they are discovered. Be careful, mom can be protective of her babies! The babies should be housed individually. Their care requirements are the same as adults just on a smaller scale. You can feed them every other day on a diet of high quality dog or cat food. Babies grow incredibly fast and can double in size in just a few weeks. Young adult size can be achieved in as little as one year but I find that they don't gain their maximum size until two years. I will often breed males at just one year of age but females I wait until they are at least two or three years old.



Final Thoughts

As you can probably tell I am very passionate about these awesome lizards! They make such wonderful pets and can also make very rewarding breeding projects for the more advanced hobbyist. Please remember that everything I wrote above is my own experience and opinion. I hope this has been helpful in starting your journey in keeping and breeding northern blue tongue skinks!

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