

# **Lizards in the Central West Care and Handling**

supplementary notes by  
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**Bearded Dragon**

Photograph: Linda Dennis

While there are many lizards and skinks found in the Central West, the ones you as a carer are most likely to encounter are the Blue-tongue Skink *Tiliqua scincoides*, the Shingleback Skink *Tiliqua* (or *Trachydosaurus*) *rugosa*, and the Bearded Dragon *Pogona barbata*. Bearded Dragons are sometimes mistaken for Frill-Necked Lizards, which are not found in this area.

## Assessment

Attacks by cats and dogs are the most common reason lizards will need your attention. Occasionally a caller will simply want the lizard removed from his or her garden, often under the misguided belief that they are poisonous. If you can, persuade the caller that they are good for their garden as they eat snails and other pests, and should be left there, unless of course there is a cat or dog harassing them! If the caller has already caught the lizard before you get to their place, advise them to put it in a box with a firm-fitting lid. Lizards can escape through remarkably small gaps. Many lizards will hiss and try to bite if confronted. However, if you swiftly pick it up by grabbing it behind the head with one hand and supporting its body with your other hand, it will usually calm down. (If it does bite you and won't let go, try tickling its ear). Put it in a box with a lid, or if you have a carry-cage, make sure it can't climb through the bars.

Often the injuries are obvious and vet assessment will be needed as to the fate of the lizard. At other times the injuries are very hard to discern, particularly after a cat-attack (because of their needle-like teeth which leave very small puncture wounds). Occasionally they will appear okay but after 2 or 3 days will begin to swell up with peritonitis and will probably need to be euthanased.



**How to handle a lizard**  
Photograph: Christine Riding

It is recommended that you leave the handling of goannas until you have attended a Reptile Handling Course!

## Housing

Quarantine the lizard from any other animals you may already have in care. They sometimes carry Snake Mite\* which is extremely hard to eradicate. Accommodate somewhere quiet and warm. A dry aquarium/vivarium is ideal for housing a lizard. Line the bottom with newspaper, covered by soil and leaf litter, or sand. Whatever housing you use, be aware that lizards can climb many surfaces (such as brick walls), can dig under walls, and can squeeze themselves out of the smallest of holes! Using their tail to give a lift, they can also climb up and push the lid off a box. Place a shallow, sturdy dish of water up one end, but make sure it is one they can climb out of as they often walk through the water-dish. A heat lamp or red light bulb (20-25 watt) should be placed at the opposite end of the aquarium.

\*The Snake Mite *Ophionyssus natricis* is tiny, pinpoint in size, brownish in colour when engorged with blood, and you can sometimes see them crawling around the lizard's head. Bathing the lizard in lukewarm water (to drown the mites) will help alleviate the problem, but usually only temporarily, especially if they have already laid eggs in the caging. However, as

the lizard is usually stressed from suddenly finding itself injured and in care, it won't take kindly to being held in the water! Mites can live for 14 days or more without a host so the cage will need to be empty for longer than that before re-use. We have found using a small steam-cleaner to be successful in eradicating the mites from the empty vivarium.

## Food

In the wild lizards eat insects, snails, worms, ants, some fruits and berries, and carrion. A diet for a lizard in care should include as much of their natural food as possible, supplemented with meal worms, tinned cat or dog food, mince coated with Wombaroo Reptile Supplement (available at petshops or vets), chopped bananas, grapes and boiled egg. Shinglebacks enjoy dandelions and other yellow flowers. A handful of half-rotted compost containing small insects placed in the enclosure will be appreciated by some lizards.

They do not need to eat every day so don't be alarmed if they don't eat initially. They will not eat until their body has warmed up, or if they are about to go into hibernation.



**Shingleback Skink**  
Photograph: Christine Riding

Remove any uneaten food from their enclosure if they don't eat it on the same day. Juvenile lizards don't appear to hibernate fully so it is a little trickier to judge their food needs. It is probably better to pass the lizard on to a more experienced carer if it is going to be in care over Winter.

## Release

Once the wounds have healed and the lizard appears to be eating well, a release site should be chosen. Ideally this should be away from an area populated with lots of cats and dogs! Release the lizard early in the day so it has plenty of time to look for food and shelter. Don't keep the lizard any longer than necessary as it could become used to human contact and this could prove fatal after release.



**Bluetongue Skink**  
Photograph: Christine Riding

## Suggested Reading

*Care and Handling of Australian Native Animals.* Ed. Suzanne J. Hand. Published by Surrey Beatty & Sons. (1997).

*Care of Australian Reptiles in Captivity.* John Weigel. Published by the Reptile Keepers Association. (2000).

*Caring for Australian Wildlife.* Sharon White. Published by Australian Geographic Pty Ltd. (1997).

*Keeping Bearded Dragons.* Darren Green & Ty Larson. Australian Reptile Keeper Publications. (2001).

*Keeping Blue-Tongue Lizards.* Grant Turner. Australian Reptile Keeper Publications. (2001).

*Keeping Shingleback Lizards.* Darren Green. Australian Reptile Keeper Publications. (2001).

## Internet Links

[http://www.amonline.net.au/factsheets/blue\\_tongue\\_lizard.htm](http://www.amonline.net.au/factsheets/blue_tongue_lizard.htm)

[www.vhs.com.au/pages/Dragonintro.html](http://www.vhs.com.au/pages/Dragonintro.html)

<http://www.faunarescue.org.au/lizard.html>

[www.austmus.gov.au/factsheets](http://www.austmus.gov.au/factsheets)

[www.reptilepublications.com.au](http://www.reptilepublications.com.au)

[www.fourthcrossingwildlife.com/photos\\_reptiles.htm](http://www.fourthcrossingwildlife.com/photos_reptiles.htm)



**Shingleback meets big bug!**

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**N.B.** The above notes are based on the personal experiences of Len and Christine Riding and should be read in conjunction with other books and notes on reptile care.

November 2006