

# Caiman Lizard Care Sheet

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**Adult Size:** up to 8-12 lbs. 4-5 ft. **Lifespan:** 10+ Year **Diet:** Omnivore

**Native To:** South America



The genus *Dracaena*, also called **Caiman Lizards** or water tegu, is in the teiid family, along with tegus and ameivas. Caiman lizards are found in South America in Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and Brazil. These lizards spend a lot of time in the water and they inhabit marshes, streams and flooded forests. Caiman lizards often bask on branches overhanging the water

## Feeding/Water:

Caiman lizards are known for their specialized diet of aquatic snails, but they will also take in other food items as well. In captivity these lizards will eat a varied diet that includes canned snails for reptiles, canned shrimp, superworms, crickets, and canned Tegu and monitor food. Fruits such as kiwi, banana, mango, papaya and, red banana can be offered as well. Supplement the diet weekly with a reptile multi vitamin and twice a week with reptile calcium supplement. Food can be offered in a dish but most lizards will happily take it from feeding tongs as well.

## Enclosure

With the likelihood of reaching four feet or longer, these animals will need an exceptionally large enclosure as adults. Young Caiman lizards should have an enclosure that measures at least four feet by one foot and is at least 2 feet tall (55 gallon tank). An adult should have an enclosure that is at least 6 feet long, 3 feet wide and 4 feet tall. A large water area should be provided for these lizards as well as a land area and plenty of vertical space with climbing opportunities.

Provide a shelter such as a Habba Hut or Cork Round on the land area. These large lizards may tear up some live plants, but robust live plants can be used to add a naturalistic look, increase humidity and provide cover. Artificial plants may also be used to provide cover and a naturalistic look to the enclosure.

Plenty of sturdy climbing branches should be provided around and especially over the water area. Large cork branches or Mopani Wood can be placed partially in the water to create basking areas. Be sure that branches are secure as these lizards love to climb and dig and they may knock over unsecured cage decorations.

On the land side of the enclosure, several different substrates may be appropriate. A combination that contains cypress mulch, one of the reptile manufacturer's earth substrate, and clean sand can help maintain high, tropical humidity and allow for some natural digging behaviors.

## Heating and Lighting

Caiman lizards are tropical animals that require warm temperatures year round in order to thrive. Daytime ambient temperatures should be maintained between 80 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit with a basking area of 100 degrees or higher. Night time temperatures may drop but should not fall below 75 degrees. There are several different heating elements that may be used to maintain the proper thermal gradient in a Caiman lizard enclosure. A halogen spot lamp can be used to provide the basking area. These bulbs burn hotter than standard basking lamps which can be very helpful when working with a large enclosure.

These lizards will spend a good portion of their day basking, so choose a branch that is able to safely and comfortably hold the animal's weight. If more than one lizard is to be kept in an enclosure, provide multiple basking areas to prevent competition over basking resources. Additional heating elements such as ceramic heat emitters and nocturnal infrared heat lamps may be used to provide supplemental heat when necessary. These

animals can be active swimmers, so it is important to protect heat lamps from splashes or to use a splash proof lamp.

While little is actually known about the UVB requirements of these animals, providing UVB is highly recommended. For many reptiles, proper exposure to UVB lighting allows animals to manufacture their own vitamin D3 which is essential for calcium metabolism. Access to proper UVB lighting can, in turn, help prevent and even reverse metabolic bone disease (MBD) in many reptiles. Another important part of the light spectrum is UVA which promotes natural behaviors such as feeding and breeding. In order to maintain healthy Caiman lizards, a 12-14 hour daylight period with access to UVA, UVB and full spectrum visible daylight should be provided. Use a Reptisun® or Powersun® UV to provide UVB, UVA and visible daylight. Use of a timer will automatically control lights to supply a consistent 12-14 hour photoperiod.

### **Caiman Lizard Water and Humidity**

A large water area should be provided for these lizards. They are excellent swimmers and divers and should be able to fully submerge themselves in their water. A minimum water depth of 12" should be provided for adults to practice natural swimming behaviors. For young Caiman lizards, a pan or tub of water can be provided but should be deep enough for the lizard to go completely under the water. These tropical animals will appreciate water kept between 75 and 85 degrees. A submersible aquarium heater may be used to keep water warm.

Caiman Lizards can be messy eaters and will produce large amounts of waste that will usually end up in the water. A large, high quality aquarium filter can help keep water clean but probably will not eliminate the need for frequent water changes. Aquarium gravel is not recommended in the water area as it can be accidentally ingested and could potentially cause gastro-intestinal impaction. To create a naturalistic looking enclosure, large river stones (too large to fit in the animal's mouth) may be used in the water area, however, waste and food articles may become trapped between them and foul the water more quickly. A bare bottomed water area for these animals is safe and the easiest to maintain.

Humidity levels for Caiman Lizards should be maintained between 60 and 80%. Use of substrates such as Forest Floor, Eco Earth, and mosses will help can help accomplish this. In a solid enclosure, such as glass, high humidity levels are easy to maintain, however, as a Caiman Lizard grows to its maximum potential, a glass terrarium will hardly be appropriate. Mist the terrarium daily to achieve the required moisture level. An automatic misting system can be greatly beneficial for those who are not able to constantly monitor humidity levels. A water source with a large surface area and the addition of live plants can also help to increase humidity.