



Armadillo Lizards

Ouroborus cataphractus

INTERMEDIATE • 6–8 IN ADULT • 10–15 YR LIFESPAN • DIURNAL • SOUTH AFRICA • CITES II

Grab your own tail, curl into a spiked ring, wait it out. That's the whole defense, and the genus name *Ouroborus* is exactly what it sounds like. Armadillo lizards are small, armored, diurnal cordylids from South Africa's rocky outcrops, and unusually for lizards, they live in groups. They're CITES Appendix II listed, and every legal animal is captive-bred, so buy from a breeder who can show paperwork. Slow to grow, slow to breed, never cheap.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Intermediate
Adult size	6–8 inches
Ambient temp	78–85 °F
Basking surface	95–100 °F
Night temp	65–72 °F
Humidity	20–40%
UVB	Recommended
Diet & cadence	Insects, every 2–3 days
Lifespan	10–15 years



Armadillo lizards are armored, slow-breeding cordylids from South Africa. Captive-bred animals turn up at NARBC shows in small numbers.

Photo: Kevin Murray / iNaturalist · CC BY

01

Temperament & Handling

The tail-in-mouth ring is a stress response, not a party trick, and a lizard doing it in your hands is telling you to put it down. These are watch-don't-touch animals: shy, quick into cover, easily overwhelmed by a grabbing hand. Keep contact to health checks, weigh-ins, and transport, and let them come out on their own schedule. Leave them alone and you get the better animal, a small armored dinosaur that sits out on its rock in full view.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Every stage wants floor space, not height, and none belong in a rack. Build around a rock pile: flat slabs stacked with gaps the depth of the lizard's body, so it can wedge in and swell tight. Group housing suits them, but social doesn't mean safe. A subordinate animal gets crowded off the basking slab and starves in its crevice; new adults added to a settled group are the flashpoint. More crevices than lizards, several feeding spots, a monthly weight on each one.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Newborn	18×12×12	24×18×12	Live-bearing, born tiny and growing slowly. Floor space, and no racks.
Juvenile	24×18×12	36×18×18	Extremely slow maturing: 3–4 years to adult size. Floor space over height.
Subadult	36×18×18	48×18×18	Social species; groups work only if every animal has its own crevice.
Adult	48×18×18	60×24×18	Rock-dwelling cordylid: stacked flat rocks give the crevices they hide in.

Enclosure sizes from Habitat-OS life-stage guidance. Dimensions in inches, length × width × height; floor space beats height.

03

Heat, Basking, and UVB

This is a sun lizard from open rocky country, so build a real gradient: 78–85 °F ambient, a basking surface of 95–100 °F, and a night drop to 65–72 °F. Overhead heat only. A heat rock has no place in a cordylid setup, because an animal that wedges itself against a hot surface will not pull away before it burns. Aim the bulb at the top slab so the whole stone warms, and spread UVB across the basking zone.

04

Humidity & Water

Dry is the target. Hold 20–40% humidity with airflow to match, because a stale, damp arid enclosure is how these lizards end up with respiratory trouble. Keep a shallow water dish they can climb out of and change it often; most will also drink droplets after a light morning mist that dries within the hour. One damp pocket under a bottom slab helps a shed along. The rest should read desert-dry to the back of your hand.

05

Substrate and Rockwork

Rock stacks sit on the enclosure floor, slabs locked together, never balanced on substrate a lizard can dig out from under. A collapsed pile kills. Over that base, a shallow topsoil and play sand mix, packed damp so it holds a shape, gives digging without dust. Babies get no loose sand at all, since that's how a small gut gets packed. Add cork bark, a low branch or two, and open floor to trot across. Enrichment here is mostly geometry.

06

Feeding

Straight insectivores. Crickets and mealworms are the staples, offered every 2–3 days, with roaches, black soldier fly larvae, and the occasional silkworm for variety. Dust with calcium, rotate in a multivitamin, and gut-load feeders the night before. Nothing wider than the space between the lizard's eyes. Resist the urge to push growth: these take 3–4 years to reach adult size, and no amount of extra food shortens that.

07

Health Red Flags

The first sign is usually absence. A lizard that stops basking and stays wedged in its crevice all day is telling you something. Then look for weight loss over the hips and tail base, retained shed on the toes and tail spines, tremors or a rubbery jaw from thin UVB and calcium, and any wheeze or open-mouth breathing. Burns on the belly mean the heat is wrong. Weigh monthly: the scale notices trouble before you do. Any of these, book a reptile vet.

Husbandry data: Habitat-OS species library. Structure follows the NARBC show handout series. Every animal is an individual - when in doubt, ask the breeder at the table or a reptile veterinarian.