



Chinese Water Dragons

Physignathus cocincinus

INTERMEDIATE · 24–36 IN ADULT · 10–15 YR LIFESPAN · DIURNAL · SOUTHEAST ASIA

A living piece of Southeast Asian rainforest: brilliant green, crested, and built to leap from branch to water. Chinese water dragons are among the most beautiful lizards in the hobby, and among the most mis-housed. The honest headline is space. This is a large, active, semi-arboreal animal that needs a tall, planted enclosure with real swimming water, not an aquarium with a screen lid. Plan the build before you buy the dragon.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Intermediate
Adult size	24–36 in (tail included)
Lifespan	10–15 years
Ambient temps	80–88 °F day, 72–78 °F night
Basking spot	90–95 °F
Humidity	70–80%
UVB	Required: 12% T5 HO, 12–18 in
Diet	Insects, fish, greens, some fruit
Native range	Southeast Asia



Captive-bred water dragons are a regular sight at NARBC shows. Look for a clean, undamaged snout and clear eyes before you commit.

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01

Temperament & Handling

Water dragons are watchers, not lap lizards. Their first answer to anything sudden is a full-speed dash. In captivity, the thing they hit is glass. That's why snout rubbing, not disease, is this species' signature injury. Move slowly, feed from long tongs, and let the dragon come to you; many settle into genuine calm over months. A skittish, fast, sharp-clawed lizard is a poor match for young kids, and that's worth saying before you buy.

02

Housing: Build Tall

Height is the whole game. Water dragons are semi-arboreal leapers that sleep on branches above water, so every stage is a vertical build, and the adult numbers are honest: 60×30×60 inches minimum, 72×36×72 preferred. **No standard aquarium is big enough for this lizard**, so most keepers build custom. Break up the glass with plants and a solid background so the dragon sees barriers, not open forest. House singly: males are territorial, and cramped pairs stress each other into injury.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	24×18×24	36×18×36	Nervous; visual barriers are essential to prevent rostral damage.
Juvenile	36×18×36	48×24×48	Add a large water feature; hold humidity at 70–80%.
Subadult	48×24×48	60×30×60	Rostral abrasion is common in too-small enclosures with glass walls.
Adult	60×30×60	72×36×72	Full-soak water area, 12% T5 UVB 12–18 in above the branch; most keepers build custom.

Enclosure minimums and preferred builds from Habitat-OS life-stage guidance; every stage is a vertical build with water.

03

Heat & Light

Run a daytime ambient of 80–88 °F with a basking platform at 90–95 °F, then let the whole enclosure fall to 72–78 °F at night; that drop is natural and they use it. UVB is not optional here: sit a 12% T5 HO tube on top of the mesh, 12 to 18 inches above the basking branch, for a UV index near 3 at the dragon. Never mount a tube under 10 inches, and replace it on the maker's schedule. Mesh costs a quarter to a half of the output and glass blocks it outright, so measure at the perch.

04

Humidity & Water

Hold humidity at 70–80% with a moisture-holding substrate, live plants and daily misting (automated misters earn their keep in a build this tall). Then there's the water itself: this species is named for it. Provide a pool big enough for full-body soaking, whether that's an oversized tub or a plumbed feature, and treat it like an aquarium. Dragons swim, soak and defecate in it, so either filter it properly or change it every day. Stagnant water is the fastest route to skin and eye infections.

05

Substrate & Planting

Go bioactive or close to it: several inches of a soil-based mix that holds moisture without going swampy, topped with leaf litter, over drainage. Plant it hard (pothos, ficus, dracaena) and lace the height with sturdy branches at different angles, including one over the water. Climbing routes and cover are not decoration for this species; they're what turns a pacing, nose-rubbing dragon into a calm one. Skip reptile carpet and bare tanks; they hold nothing but stress.

06

Feeding

Water dragons are omnivores with a strong insect lean: gut-loaded crickets, roaches and worms, plus fish, greens and a little fruit. Juveniles eat daily; adults every 2–3 days. Dust insects with plain calcium (no D3, no phosphorus) at most feedings, and add a D3 multivitamin weekly while they grow, twice a month once adult. With working UVB, that is all the D3 they need. Offer food from tongs or a dish, not loose on substrate, and rotate the menu; a dragon fed one insect holds out for it.

07

Health Red Flags

Check the snout first, every day: raw, scabbed or swollen rostral skin means the dragon is hitting glass, and untreated rubs become mouth rot. Fix the enclosure that week, and see a vet if there's swelling or discharge. Watch too for the slow signs of low UVB: a soft or shortening jaw, trembling limbs, reluctance to climb. Those are metabolic bone disease arriving, and it is far easier to prevent than reverse; get a reptile vet involved at the first sign.

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.