



Red Tegus

Salvator rufescens

INTERMEDIATE · 3.5–4.5 FT ADULT · 15–20 YR LIFESPAN · DIURNAL · OMNIVORE

Red tegus get sold as the dog of the lizard world, and there is something to that: they're bright, food-motivated, and they learn a routine and the person who keeps it. It's half the story. A grown red tegu is a heavy, powerful animal with real claws and real jaws. It needs floor space measured in feet, and the calm one you met at a show got that way through daily work.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Intermediate
Adult size	3.5–4.5 feet
Lifespan	15–20 years
Ambient temp	80–90 °F
Basking spot	100–110 °F
Night temp	72–78 °F
Humidity	60–80 %
UVB	Required
Diet	Omnivore, fed every 2–3 days



Captive-bred Argentine red tegus fill breeder tables at NARBC shows. They sell small and grow into a serious, long-lived lizard.

Photo: Hugo Hulsberg / iNaturalist · CC0

01

Smart, Strong, and Not a Beginner Lizard

Tegus are among the sharpest lizards in the trade, and a red tegu shows it: it learns routines, tracks who is in the room, and comes out to see what you're carrying. That intelligence is why they're rewarding and why they're demanding. Calm adults are built by short, boring, daily sessions over months, not by luck. Skip the work and you get a grown animal that treats every opening hand as food. Claws and tail carry real force, so this is not a children's lizard.

02

Housing: Floor Space Wins

Every stage wants floor, not height. Racks are wrong for this animal at any size, and so is the plan to buy small and upgrade later: red tegus reach full size in three to four years. Build for the adult footprint in the table below, with a locking lid and a front a determined digger cannot shove open. House them one to an enclosure. Adults are territorial, and a food-motivated tegu bites whatever moves at feeding time; cagemates lose toes and tail tips that way.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	36×18×18	48×24×18	Grows as fast as an Argentine B&W, so plan the next size up early.
Juvenile	48×24×24	72×24×24	Red deepens with age, so a plain-looking juvenile is nothing to worry about.
Subadult	72×30×30	96×48×36	Full size arrives at 3–4 years; the enclosure has to get there first.
Adult	96×48×36	120×48×48	Deep digging substrate, and a genuine winter brumation, not an illness.

Habitat-OS life-stage guidance for the Argentine red tegu. Every stage wants floor space over height, and none of them suit a rack.

03

Heat & Light

Give a basking surface at 100–110 °F, ambient air of 80–90 °F across the warm half, and a night drop to 72–78 °F. Use overhead halogen on a dimming thermostat, never a heat rock; a lizard this heavy will sit on a hot stone until it burns. Make the basking platform wide enough for the whole animal, not just the head. **UVB is not optional here:** run a linear tube over the basking zone, inside the enclosure or above screen. Glass blocks UVB outright and mesh cuts it by a quarter to a half.

04

Humidity & Water

Hold humidity at 60–80 %. Get there with wet substrate rather than a spray bottle: pour water into the lower layers, leave the top dry, and let the burrow do the work. Read it with a hygrometer at animal height, not a dial stuck high on the glass. Give a water tub the tegu can climb into and soak in, heavy enough not to tip, and dump it the moment it fouls. Dry air announces itself as stuck shed on toes and tail tip.

05

Substrate, Digging, and Enrichment

Tegus are diggers, so substrate is furniture here, not flooring. Use a soil and mulch mix that holds a tunnel when packed damp, deep enough that the animal can vanish into it. Loose sand is not a tegu substrate at any age; it packs into the gut and it does nothing for humidity. Above ground, give a hide that fits the whole body, a flat basking platform, and things to shove around. A tegu with nothing to investigate will investigate the door latch.

06

Feeding an Omnivore

Red tegus are true omnivores: rodents, eggs, insects, and fruit all belong in the rotation. Feed every 2–3 days and vary the menu; a tegu raised on rodents alone gets fat and refuses everything else. Dust insects and produce with plain calcium, D3-free and phosphorus-free; the UVB is the D3 source. Whole prey covers itself. Multivitamin weekly while growing, twice monthly once adult. An adult that quits eating ahead of brumation is usually, not always, on its calendar. Weigh before you assume.

07

Health Red Flags

Failing to tell brumation from illness is the mistake that kills tegus. A brumating tegu is quiet but holds its weight, so weigh monthly, because a sick one keeps losing. Watch for a rubbery jaw, trembling limbs, or dragging back legs, which mean bone disease from weak UVB. Gaping at the basking spot is normal. Open-mouth breathing away from it, or bubbling at the nose, is a respiratory infection. Any of that is a reptile-vet visit, not a wait-and-see.

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.