



Tiger Salamanders

Ambystoma tigrinum

BEGINNER · 6–13 IN ADULT · 15–25 YR LIFESPAN · NOCTURNAL BURROWER · NORTH AMERICA

A salamander built like a tank, with an appetite to match. Tiger salamanders are the largest land-dwelling salamanders in North America, thick-bodied and boldly barred, food-driven enough to greet the tongs at the burrow mouth. The honest headline: this is a look-don't-touch pet with permeable skin, and it wants cool, moist, quiet ground. Give it that, and it's one of the easiest amphibians in the hobby.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Beginner
Adult size	6–13 inches
Lifespan	15–25 years
Ambient temp	60–72 °F
Night temp	55–65 °F
Humidity	60–80%
Lighting	Low UVB beneficial
Diet	Worms, crickets, small mice
Feeding	Every 2–3 days



Bold yellow-and-black barring makes tiger salamanders an easy spot at NARBC shows. Look for chunky, captive-bred animals.

Photo: Peter Paplanus / iNaturalist · CC BY

01

Bold, but Hands-Off

Tiger salamanders are the extroverts of the salamander world: hardy, bold, and quick to learn that you are the food source. Many will surface at feeding time and take worms straight from tongs. But bold isn't cuddly. Amphibian skin is permeable, and the salts and oils on human hands do it harm. Handle only when you must, with wet hands rinsed clean of any soap, and keep lotions, sanitizers, and sprays far from the enclosure. This is a watch-and-feed pet, and a genuinely good one.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Tiger salamanders live two lives. The larva is fully aquatic until metamorphosis. In some populations it never leaves the water, staying larval for life. On land, floor space beats height, and the cage grows with the animal: 36×18×18 is the adult minimum, 48×24×18 preferred, because a foot-long burrower uses every inch. House them singly (cagemates get sampled), skip racks at every stage, and site the enclosure somewhere cool and quiet: basement temperatures, not reptile-room ones.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Larva	12×8×8	18×10×10	Fully aquatic; some populations stay larval for life (neoteny).
Juvenile	18×12×12	24×18×12	Voracious and quick-growing; upsize before it feels cramped.
Subadult	24×18×12	36×18×18	Fully fossorial now; give deep, moist substrate.
Adult	36×18×18	48×24×18	Deep substrate to burrow, shallow water dish; captive-bred preferred.

Enclosure minimums and preferred footprints from Habitat-OS life-stage guidance; the larval stage runs fully aquatic.

03

Keep It Cool

Forget heat lamps. The risk runs the other way. Aim for 60–72 °F ambient with a night drop to 55–65 °F, which means most homes need no heat at all and warm homes need a plan: a basement, a cooler room, air conditioning in summer. Sustained warmth much past the low 70s is genuine stress for this species. Low-output UVB is beneficial; run it over part of the enclosure and let the deep substrate offer the shade a burrower expects.

04

Water & Humidity

Damp, never swampy: hold humidity at 60–80% with a moisture-holding substrate and a light misting when the surface dries. A shallow water dish, easy to climb out of, stays in at all times. **Chlorine and chloramine kill amphibians, so every drop of water this animal touches must be dechlorinated.** Treat tap water with a conditioner that neutralizes both, whether it fills the dish, the mister, or the larval tank. Change fouled dish water promptly; with this species, that's often.

05

Substrate Is the Enrichment

A burrower's cage is judged by what's underfoot. Give a deep bed of clean, moisture-holding material (coco fiber, fertilizer-free topsoil, a sphagnum blend) deep enough that the salamander can vanish completely, because vanishing is what this animal does all day. Keep it damp in the lower layers, drier on top. Skip gravel, cedar, pine, and anything perfumed or fertilized. Cork bark, leaf litter, and a dark hide or two finish it; expect to see your salamander mainly at feeding time.

06

Feeding (and Overfeeding)

Tiger salamanders eat like they've never been fed, and that's the trap. Earthworms and gut-loaded crickets are the backbone; a small mouse is an occasional treat, not a staple. Dust with plain calcium (no D3, no phosphorus) at most feedings; without a UVB lamp, a calcium with D3 replaces it once or twice a week rather than adding to it. Multivitamin twice monthly. Feed every 2–3 days with tongs, portioned to the animal. The classic mistake is obesity: feed the schedule, not the begging.

07

Health Red Flags

Amphibian trouble shows on the skin first: reddening on the belly or legs, open sores, cloudy patches, or a salamander that turns dry and tacky. Add food refusal beyond two weeks, weight loss, bloating, or lying exposed on the surface for days. A burrower that stops burrowing is telling you something. Flailing after cleaning or misting means chemical exposure: rinse with dechlorinated water and call an amphibian-savvy exotics vet the same day.

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.