

Chinese Water Dragon

Physignathus cocincinus



LIFE SPAN: 10-20 years

AVERAGE SIZE: females approx. 2 feet
males approx. 3 feet
Tail comprises 79% - 75% of total length

CAGE TEMPS: Day Temps – 84-88 °F
Basking – 90 F
Night Temps – 75-80 F

HUMIDITY: 80%

* If temp falls below 75° at night, may need supplemental infrared or ceramic heat.

WILD HISTORY: Many water dragons purchased in stores and from breeders are often wild caught specimens. For this reason, it is imperative to take your new dragon to an exotic veterinarian immediately to be tested and treated for parasites.

Water dragons are arboreal (tree dwelling) creatures, yet are also semi-aquatic and can spend a considerable amount of time on the ground and in the water.

All water dragon species are from tropical humid climates, such as Vietnam and Southern Thailand.

PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES: Water dragons are long, slim bodied lizards with tails that are usually longer than the lizard's body itself. A healthy dragon is bright green in color with bluish patches on the cheeks. The toes are long and the eyes are a bright orange-yellow color.

Water Dragons have a light sensitive "third eye" on the top of their heads, visible as a shiny spot about the size of a pin head. Known as the parietal eye, it controls hormone production and helps the animal regulate the amount of time it basks in the sun.

They are extremely strong swimmers and can remain underwater for up to half an hour. Water dragons can also run on their hind legs!

NORMAL BEHAVIOR & INTERACTION: Water dragons are generally docile and intelligent lizards that will tolerate some handling when tamed. They may be aggressive to one another, and care must be taken to introduce cage mates slowly and with apprehension. There is no guarantee they will get along well.

When stressed or angry, water dragons may puff up their throats, wave their arms, head bob, whip their tails or lick each other!

Water dragons have a bad habit of banging their faces against the glass of their enclosure if the enclosure is too small. They can easily rub their faces raw and break their jaws trying to get out.

NOTE: Water dragons *can* be housed together; but ample space must be made available for each lizard.

Cage mates are never guaranteed to get along well, so it is always best to begin with only one lizard.

DO NOT house water dragons with other species due to the differences in environment, temperatures, and the fact that some species can be highly stressed in the presence of other species. Each species may also harbor different parasites/protozoans/bacteria (even a healthy reptile harbors a small amount at all times), which may make each other ill.

FEEDING: Water Dragons are omnivorous; which means they eat both meat and vegetables.

About 10%-15% of an adult's diet should be made up of plant matter, the remaining percentage being protein.

VEGETABLES: Dark leafy vegetables like collard and mustard greens, kale and red tip leaf lettuce are good for a dragon, as are clover, parsley, and broccoli, green beans, peas, squash, grated carrots and sweet potatoes.

Spinach and iceberg lettuce should never be fed.

Fruits such as figs, kiwi, apples, raspberries, strawberries and melons can also be fed, but should not be given as often.

Remember to wash vegetables thoroughly, then cut or shred to make it easier to digest.

Remove any uneaten vegetables before turning the lights off at night.

PROTEIN: Protein sources such as: gut-loaded crickets, mealworms, cockroaches, kingworms, butter worms, small goldfish, earthworms, wax worms and pinkie mice dusted with a supplement should also be part of the diet. Wild caught insects should never be fed, since they can carry disease. All insects should be gut loaded (fed a nutritious diet about 24-hours before being offered to your dragon – see our cricket care sheet). Be careful to feed the proper size prey for your dragon's size. A good rule of thumb is that a cricket should be never be larger than the distance between the lizard's eyes, or the distance from its eyes to its nose. When feeding larger insects to your pet, try to make sure the insects have recently molted, as an insect with a large, hard exoskeleton is difficult to digest and may cause impactions.

LIGHTNING BUGS MUST NEVER BE FED TO A WATER DRAGON. THEY ARE POISONOUS.

Adults should be given insects 2-3 times a week, with salads on the rest of the days. Feed as many insects as the lizard can eat in 3-5 minutes.

All uneaten insects should be removed from the enclosure as they can bite your dragon and cause injury, especially to the eyes.

Some water dragon owners find it easier to feed their pet in a separate enclosure, free of bedding and furniture, this way you can be sure your lizard eats all its insects, the prey cannot hide, and the lizard will not pick up any bedding when grabbing prey and mistakenly ingest it along with the prey.

Commercially prepared diets are available, but they should never constitute the whole diet of your lizard. They can be left in the enclosure in case your pet is hungry between meals.

SHEDDING: Unlike snakes, lizards shed their skin in patches, not all in one piece. Your pet may become an overall dull color, and the skin over the eyelids may 'pop' at a certain point and make your lizard look like a bug-eyed bullfrog. Do not peel off the skin if it is not ready to come off. This can be dangerous and painful.

Most lizard species will shed every 4-6 weeks. If the enclosure environment is ideal, the keeper often has no idea that their pet has shed, as it will happen more quickly and the lizard will often eat its own shed skin.

In the wild, reptiles have a much easier time with their sheds, as they are generally in a more naturally humid environment and have access to pools or bodies of water in which they can soak at will. Even reptiles from arid areas find humid places to go during the shedding process, such as cold, moist burrows under the sand or caves.

The shedding process happens when the lizard's body begins to grow a new layer of skin; that new layer begins to separate from the old and a very thin layer of fluid forms between the two layers. If your pet's enclosure is too dry, this fluid layer will not form properly, making it difficult for your reptile to shed properly.

To create more humidity, the entire tank can be lightly spray misted twice a day during shedding time. Spray once in the morning and once later in the day. Make sure the later spray dries completely before lights go off for the night, as the droplets will not have proper time to dry and may contribute to respiratory disease.

Some lizards may also benefit from a 'moist box' during shedding time. This can be a Tupperware-like container (with the cover on) containing a bed of moist reptile terrarium moss. The container should be big enough for the entire lizard to be inside with an entry door cut in the side just large enough for the lizard to come and go at will. Keep the moss moist but not watery, and place the box on the heating pad in the tank.

If your lizard still has a hard time getting the shed completely off its toes, tail or head; help him by spraying the area with water and gently massaging the skin until it peels off. If the retained shed is severe and cannot be removed easily, see your exotic veterinarian.

SUPPLEMENTS: Dust food with calcium supplement and vitamin supplements. As a rule, a growing juvenile's food (and a pregnant/gravid female's) should be dusted more often than an adult's. Follow your veterinarian's instructions for applying supplements to avoid over-supplementing food.

Our veterinarian recommends dusting insects with a good quality calcium supplement fortified with vitamin D3, 2-3 times a week. (Avoid using a calcium supplement with added phosphorous, unless specifically directed by your veterinarian, since this can promote kidney disease.)

Always consult your veterinarian for specific directions on supplementing your pet's food, since there are many variables that go into determining the best supplementing regimen for each given animal.

WATER: All water given to amphibians for bathing, swimming or drinking, as well as water used for misting must be 100% free of chlorine and heavy metals. (Not all home water filtration systems remove 100% of the chlorine and heavy metals from tap water). We recommend that you use unflavored bottled drinking water or bottled natural spring water; never untreated tap water. If tap water is used, you should treat it with a de-chlorinating treatment (available in the fish department). If you do not want to chemically de-chlorinate the water, you can leave an open container of tap water out for at least 24 hours. The chlorine will naturally dissipate. Do not use distilled water, which can cause severe medical problems, since it lacks minerals that are essential to important body functions. Change the water in your dragon's

enclosure every one to two days. A daily misting or two with chlorine-free water will also be appreciated. However, care should be taken not to allow the enclosure to become damp. Also, do not mist less than two hours before turning the heat lamps off for the day, as the droplets will not have proper time to dry and may contribute to respiratory disease.

SOAKING: Lizards can benefit greatly from a good deep-water soak at least once a week. A plastic tub makes a good reptile bathtub. Fill the container deep enough so the entire lizard's body can be submerged under water, but the head can be out of water. The water should be nice and warm (about 68-70 degrees). Soak your pet for about a half hour at a time. This is especially helpful during a bad shed or when your dragon might be a bit constipated.

RECOMMENDED SUPPLIES:

- *Cage size should be 5-6 feet long x 2-3 feet deep x 4-6 feet high.
- *Lg. dome and 100 - 150 watt bulb for heat.
- *Under tank heater – placed under same side of tank as basking light
- *Temperature / humidity gauge – do not stick to side of tank
- *At least one dry hide house
- *Coconut fiber substrate, moistened
- *Large water bowl – big enough to soak and swim in
- *Fluorescent UVB Bulb and housing

HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT: Reptiles are ectothermic, or cold-blooded, which means they are dependent on the temperature of their immediate environment to regulate their body temperature. Therefore, we must create an environment with several heat gradients – warm on one end and cool on the other. With this set-up, your pet can go to either end depending on whether he needs to be warmer or cooler.

ENCLOSURE SIZE: Water dragons have a bad habit of banging their faces against the glass of their enclosure if the enclosure is too small. They can easily rub their faces raw and/or break their jaws trying to get out. Therefore, they need a sizable cage. Cage size should be 5-6 feet long x 2-3 feet deep x 4-6 feet high.

Because of the large size requirements for water dragon enclosures AND their need for a higher humidity level, it is often difficult to keep the required humidity level high. Cages often need to be constructed of wood and mesh, therefore allowing humidity to escape easily. Try covering several sides of the cage with Plexiglas or heavy sheet plastic to keep humidity levels high, as a low humidity level can create illness.

Take care to not use toxic substances and supplies while building a dragon cage. Waterproof wood surfaces with a low-toxin, water based polyurethane. Plywood and plexi are fine to use. If using silicone to seal joints, use only aquarium sealant.

Be sure to allow more than enough time to allow all products to dry properly to avoid poisoning your new pet.

IT IS NOT TRUE THAT A REPTILE WILL ONLY GROW AS LARGE AS ITS ENCLOSURE ALLOWS!!

COVER: Make sure the cage has an escape-proof metal mesh top. It should fit snugly onto the tank and have strong clips locking it on. It is important that the top is METAL mesh, as you will place the heat lamp directly on top of this cover.

HEAT PAD: Reptile heat pads can be adhered directly onto the underside of the glass bottom of the tank. Stick the pad on the glass on one of the very far ends of the tank (opposite the water dish). For safety reasons, make sure to attach the rubber feet (contained in the box) at all four corners of the underside of the tank. This will allow air to circulate underneath the tank and prevent the heat from being trapped under the tank. Leave the heat pad ON 24 hours a day.

A human-grade heat pad may be used on the low to medium setting. Do be sure to allow for proper ventilation for safety reasons. **Be sure to purchase a heat pad without automatic shut-off, which are still available.

Heat pads specifically manufactured for reptiles and human-grade heat pads are safe to leave on 24 hours a day. DO NOT use reptile heat rocks. They heat unevenly and have caused severe thermal burns in reptiles and amphibians.

HEAT LAMP: Place the heat dome with the basking bulb on top of the cage directly over where the reptile heat pad has been placed on the underside of one end of the tank. The heat lamp should be turned on in the morning, and off at night. (See “Day/Night Light Cycles” below.

Follow directions carefully with all products – READ THE INSTRUCTION SHEET!!

Always choose fixtures with ceramic sockets and be careful to choose the socket that is properly rated for the wattage bulb that you will be using. Do not place the fixtures by dry wood or flammable fabrics. All heaters should be placed out of the reach of children and all pets – including cats and dogs. Be very careful to make sure that your caged pet cannot reach and touch the heating device in its own cage. A thermal burn to the face or body can be painful and life threatening.

BASKING AREA: A warmer basking area matching the temperature listed at the top of this care sheet must be established on the warm side of the cage. This area is directly under the basking bulb and will be higher in the cage for arboreal species. The basking area should be the warmest area in the enclosure. Maintaining the proper temperature in this spot is extremely important to the health of your pet.

UVB LIGHT: Exposure to UVB (ultraviolet B) light is critical in allowing an animal to synthesize vitamin D₃ in their skin and metabolize calcium in their body.

If an animal is not exposed to an adequate level of UVB light, it will gradually develop physical problems from the result of mineral deficiencies such as low blood calcium (hypocalcaemia), soft eggs (females), stunted growth and metabolic bone disorder, which can be fatal if left untreated. In addition, recent studies have linked sub-optimal vitamin D levels with poor immune system function.

All day-active (diurnal) indoor reptiles, amphibians, birds and hermit crabs should be allowed self-selected exposure to UVB lighting for up to 8-12 hours a day. This means they should be able to bask in the light but also get away if desired, much as they might in the wild. Many twilight-active (crepuscular) and night-active (nocturnal) species do get some exposure to the sun and may also benefit from low levels of UVB, which helps regulate their photoperiod and vitamin D levels as well.

Please see our additional “UVB Lighting for Companion Birds and Reptiles” for specific instructions for your particular pet and the UVB bulb that we recommend for him or her.

HIDE HOUSE: Place a hide house inside the cage directly over where you have positioned the heat pad, and directly under the heat lamp above.

WATER BOWL: The large water crock can be placed on the opposite end of the cage, along with another hide house, if desired. Many water dragons like to jump from their branches into their water dishes. If yours do, enlarge the water container so they do not hurt themselves when jumping in.

SUBSTRATE: We recommend a loose coconut fiber substrate, available in the reptile department and made by several companies. It is made from the husks of coconuts. This substrate is ideal for water dragons, as it will help hold humidity in and is also a perfect substrate for plants. Keep the substrate slightly damp, but not watery.

Placing large, smooth pebbles over the surface of the bedding will prevent the dragon from picking up and consuming the coconut fiber when hunting prey.

BRANCHES & PLANTS: Dragons love to climb, and additionally must have a basking area on the warm side of the tank. If you have more than one dragon, be sure to create more than one basking area. Choose branches that your dragon can climb on safely and lie on comfortably. The basking area can consist of branches and a platform positioned under the basking light so the dragon sits about six inches under the lamp. Sand blasted grape vine branches are available in the pet store; these serve as good sturdy climbing branches. Be careful of bringing in branches from outside, as they can house parasites.

Live plants can help increase the humidity in your dragon enclosure. Be sure to include only reptile safe plants such as pothos, aloe, philodendrons, spider plants, ficus, and dracenae. They can be planted directly into the enclosure substrate.

TEMPERATURES: Cage temperatures should be monitored daily and kept at the temperatures listed at the top of this page. Use your reptile thermometer to check the temperatures in different places in the cage regularly to make sure they continually match the listed proper temperatures.

* If the room temperature falls below 75 degrees at night, a supplemental infrared or ceramic heat fixture may be necessary. (These fixtures do not emit a light spectrum that is visible to the lizard, so it will not disturb him at night, but they WILL provide the necessary supplemental heat.)

If your lizard does not receive the proper heat at the proper temperatures along with UVB light, he may become sick with issues such as respiratory disease and will probably stop eating, as lizards have a hard time digesting their food without proper heat and light.

DAY/NIGHT LIGHT CYCLES AND HEATING: All reptiles must have distinct day and night periods in their enclosure to maintain their biological rhythms. Water dragons need 8-12 hours of daytime and 8-12 hours of nighttime. However, as the daylight hours change seasonally outside, daylight hours inside the tank should reflect the same.

The day period must be light, and the night period must be dark.

A timer should be used to set day/night periods.

HABITAT MAINTENANCE: Daily maintenance should consist of spot cleaning by removing soiled substrate, cleaning water bowl thoroughly and wiping glass clean.

The entire tank should be cleaned thoroughly at least once every month with:

- A mild dishwashing liquid (a weak dilution) in warm water, THEN
- Vinegar & water (1:8)
OR bleach and warm water (1:32)
- Cage “furniture” should also be scrubbed clean with the same dilution.
- RINSE OFF ALL SOAP AND BLEACH THOROUGHLY WITH PLAIN WATER BEFORE RE-INTRODUCING YOUR PET TO ITS ENCLOSURE!!
- NEVER MIX VINEGAR AND BLEACH – IT CREATES A TOXIC SOLUTION
- NOTE: water used for cleaning does not need to be de-chlorinated, as your pet will not be drinking it or bathing in it.

GROOMING & HYGIENE: To reduce the risk of contracting and spreading salmonella poisoning, all handlers should wash their hands after handling any reptile.

SIGNS OF A HEALTHY ANIMAL: smooth, even skin; no traces of mites (small, reddish brown spots around nostrils, near ears and eyes); clear eyes, rounded, full body; strong, even, smooth jaw line; bright eyes; regular record of healthy feeding and defecating schedule

It is very important to keep a journal for each animal that records feeding, refusal, defecation, shedding, unusual behavior, changes in behavior and dates of bulb changes. This will help your veterinarian trouble-shoot any health issues.

We recommend physical exams every year or two years with an exotic pet veterinarian for pet reptiles and amphibians. If your vet sees your pet regularly, many common conditions that afflict pet reptiles and amphibians can be caught and treated early. If not caught early enough or if left untreated, many of these conditions can become far worse if not fatal.

SIGNS OF ILLNESS: Irregular scales; small reddish brown spots (mites) around mouth, eye area, ear area; irregular jaw line, ‘dents’ in mouth with or without cottage cheese-like material (mouth rot); cloudy eyes or dull colored body when not in a shed; thinned body; irregular feeding and defecating habits. Limp, thin body, lethargy, sunken eyes, pinkish patches or spots on belly or sides; obvious bite marks or wounds from cage mate or prey.

Red, fluid filled patches may indicate thermal burns.

SOME COMMON PROBLEMS INCLUDE:

HEALTH ISSUE:	SYMPTOMS:	TREATMENT:
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Calcium/phosphorus imbalance (MBD – Metabolic Bone Disease)	Failure to grow, weakness, limb deformities and fractures, seizures	See exotic pet veterinarian, ensure optimal diet with proper calcium supplementation and UV light
Intestinal parasites (coccidia and pinworms are common)	Failure to grow, loss of appetite, abnormal stools	See exotic pet veterinarian (fecal parasite evaluation and appropriate medication)
Skin infections (fungal dermatitis is common)	Discoloration (esp. blackening) of the skin	Call exotic pet veterinarian. Optimizing cage set-up, topical and systemic medications
Egg binding in females	Abdominal enlargement, decreased appetite, difficulty defecating	See an exotic pet veterinarian immediately.
Stomatitis / Snout Damage	Dented, shortened snout. May have blisters or sores present	See an exotic pet veterinarian immediately.
Respiratory Infections	Labored breathing, moisture or crust around nostrils, closed and/or crusty eyes. Whistling with breathing	Increase heat and see an exotic pet veterinarian immediately.