

# Crested Gecko

*Rhacodactylus ciliatus*



**LIFE SPAN:** 15-20 years

**AVERAGE SIZE:** 8-10 inches

**CAGE TEMPS:** Day Temps – 75-80 °F

**HUMIDITY:** 85%

- If temp falls below 70° at night, may need supplemental infrared or ceramic heat.

**WILD HISTORY:** These little geckos are arboreal (tree dwelling) and nocturnal (most active at night). They are from Caledonia.

They were once thought extinct until re-discovered in 1994 and have been popular in the pet trade ever since.

**PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS:** “Cresties”, as they are affectionately called, do not have eyelids. They use their long tongues to lick their eyeballs to clear them of debris. They are named for the crest that runs from their “eyelashes”, down their backs to their tails. These “cresties” have the famous sticky feet that allow them to walk up and down glass without effort. The pads of their feet are actually made up of thousands of tiny, microscopic hairs.

**NORMAL BEHAVIOR & INTERACTION:** Crested geckos are sweet, docile creatures. They can be tamed and handled; however, handlers must be careful they do not jump off the hand and into danger. They are excellent jumpers. Cresties will drop their tails (lose them) when trying to escape a predator, because of stress, or from constriction from un-shed skin. Crested gecko tails do not grow back. Cresties can also change their color from light to dark in order to camouflage properly.

**NOTE:** Crested geckos can be housed together, but never two males in the same cage. One male and two females *or* three females (three lizards total) can be housed comfortably in a 29-gallon enclosure. DO NOT house crested geckos with other species due to the differences in care, 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:** Omnivorous; eats both live prey and fruit.

**CRESTED GECKO DIET (CGD):** Commercially available crested gecko diet is a powdered meal supplement that is mixed with water to form a paste. Give this to your gecko every day to every other day. It contains nutrients that the gecko needs along with a good balance of supplements. Place a dish of the diet in the enclosure at night and remove it in the morning.

**CGD is an extremely important part of your gecko’s diet. Please do not omit it.**

**PROTEIN:** The crested gecko protein source is gut-loaded crickets dusted with a supplement powder.

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 lizard – see our cricket care sheet).

Be careful to feed the proper size prey for your gecko. 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.

Adults should be given 4-6 crickets 2-3 times a week.

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

Some gecko 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.

**FRUIT:** Cresties also need fresh mashed fruit to balance the diet. Do not feed baby food, as this often contains too much sugar. Try apricots, mangoes, bananas and peaches. You can alternate fruit and crickets on opposing days.

**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.

If the retained shed is severe and cannot be removed easily, see your exotic veterinarian. 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.

**SUPPLEMENTS:** The crested gecko diet that you purchase should have a good balance of vitamins and minerals, specific to the crested gecko’s needs. Be sure to buy a quality diet. It should contain calcium and vitamin D3. If you follow the directions above for feeding your crestie, s/he should get all the nutrients s/he needs.

**WATER:** A large bowl of clean fresh chlorine-free water must always be available. Place it on the cool side of your reptile’s enclosure. Change it daily, or as needed, as your pet will most likely bathe in it as well. Crested geckos will most often drink from the droplets of water that have been sprayed into the cage, so do be sure to spray the inside of the cage 2 times a day. All water given to reptiles for drinking, as well as water used for misting, soaking or bathing 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. De-chlorinator is available in the pet store 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. Do not use distilled water, which can cause severe medical problems, since it lacks minerals that are essential to important body functions. If only tap water can be used, at least de-chlorinate the water.

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.

## **RECOMMENDED SUPPLIES:**

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| *A 29 gallon fish tank or reptile tank is perfect for 1-3 crested geckos | *Large light dome and 75 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 |
| *Dry hide house, may want to include more than one                       | *Coconut fiber substrate                                     |
| *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:** The enclosure should be a solid glass sided tank long enough to create the two separate temperature gradients (warm and cool); a crested gecko tank should be at least 29-gallon or larger for 3 adults. A 20 gallon HIGH tank will be a large enough enclosure for one adult.

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

**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.

**\*\*\*** Although your gecko will most likely NOT spend much time on the floor of the enclosure, the heat pad will help contribute to the overall humidity and ambient temperature of the enclosure.

**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.

**UVB LIGHT: Although crested geckos are primarily nocturnal and do not require UVB light, some research has proven that all reptiles can benefit from low levels of UVB light.**

Exposure to UVB (ultraviolet B) light is critical in allowing an animal to synthesize vitamin D<sub>3</sub> 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.

**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 crested geckos, as it will help hold humidity in and is perfect for plants. Keep the substrate slightly damp, but not watery.

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

Paper towels and newspaper are often used for a cage lining as well.

If “reptile carpeting” is used, it **MUST** be kept extremely clean. The carpeting can foster the growth of bacteria and fungus, which can in turn be very dangerous to your pet. If you insist on using the carpet, purchase two so you can interchange them regularly.

**BRANCHES & PLANTS:** Crested geckos love to climb, and additionally must have a basking area on the warm side of the tank. Choose branches that your geckos 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 gecko 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 gecko 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 70 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 gecko does not receive the proper heat at the proper temperatures, he may become sick with issues such as respiratory disease and may stop eating, as geckos have a hard time digesting their food without proper heat.

**DAY/NIGHT LIGHT CYCLES AND HEATING:** All reptiles must have distinct day and night periods in their enclosure to maintain their biological rhythms. Crested geckos 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 couple months 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 skin; 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:**

**Calcium/phosphorus imbalance (MBD – Metabolic Bone Disease)**

**SYMPTOMS:**

Failure to grow, weakness, limb deformities and fractures, seizures

**TREATMENT:**

See exotic pet veterinarian, ensure optimal diet with proper calcium supplementation and UV light

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<b>Intestinal parasites (coccidia and pinworms are common)</b>	Small reddish-brown spots around eyes, mouth & on body or in substrate. However, pet may show no signs of harboring parasites besides declining health.	See exotic pet veterinarian (fecal parasite evaluation and appropriate medication)
<b>Skin issues (fungal dermatitis is common)</b>	Ulcers, patches or wounds visible on skin, lethargy or loss of appetite	Call exotic pet veterinarian. Optimizing cage set-up, topical and systemic medications
<b>Egg binding in females</b>	Abdominal enlargement, decreased appetite, difficulty defecating	See an exotic pet veterinarian immediately
<b>Respiratory Infections</b>	Labored breathing, moisture or crust around nostrils, closed and/or crusty eyes. Whistling with breathing	Increase heat and see an exotic pet veterinarian immediately

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