



Argentine Black & White Tegus

Salvator merianae

INTERMEDIATE · 3.5–4.5 FT ADULT · DIURNAL · OMNIVORE · UVB REQUIRED · SOUTH AMERICA

The closest thing reptile keeping has to a dog. Argentine black and white tegus are the most popular tegu for good reason: big, clever, food-motivated lizards that, socialized young, become genuinely companionable animals with individual personalities. The lizard, honestly, is the easy part. Space is the commitment, and it arrives fast. Price out the eight-foot enclosure before the temperament wins you over, because that's what you're actually bringing home.

AT A GLANCE

Difficulty	Intermediate
Adult size	3.5–4.5 ft
Daytime ambient	80–90 °F
Basking surface	100–110 °F
Night temp	72–78 °F
Humidity	60–80%
UVB	Required
Diet	Rodents, eggs, fruit, insects
Feeding cadence	Every 2–3 days



Captive-bred Argentine tegus are a fixture at NARBC shows. Meet a full-grown adult before you commit to the enclosure it needs.

Photo: Hugo Hulsberg / iNaturalist · CC0

01

Temperament & Handling

The dog-like reputation is real, but it's earned, not included. A tegu socialized from young (short, calm sessions, hands that never smell like food) grows into a lizard that seeks you out, learns a routine, and rides out household chaos unbothered. Skip the work and you have a powerful, food-driven animal with claws to match. Expect an adolescent attitude phase, keep sessions consistent, and respect the food drive: wash your hands before you reach in.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Growth is the story here. The hatchling enclosure is outgrown in months, juveniles can gain a pound a month, and the upgrade ladder moves fast. Budget for the adult build from day one. **An adult needs an 8×4-ft footprint at absolute minimum; commit to that space before you buy the hatchling.** In practice most keepers build custom. Floor space beats height at every stage, these are not rack animals, and one tegu per enclosure is the rule.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	36×18×18	48×24×18	Rapid growth: this enclosure is outgrown in months.
Juvenile	48×24×24	72×24×24	Can gain a pound per month during peak growth.
Subadult	72×30×30	96×48×36	Needs deep substrate for brumation behaviors.
Adult	96×48×36	120×48×48	8×4×4 often cited as the minimum; larger is always better. Most keepers build custom.

Minimum and preferred enclosure sizes (inches, L×W×H) from Habitat-OS life-stage guidance.

03

Heat, Light & UVB

Days run 80–90 °F ambient with a basking surface of 100–110 °F; a grown tegu will use surface temps of 110–120 °F, so build a basking zone wide enough to heat the whole animal (usually multiple lamps over a flat platform). Nights drop to 72–78 °F. UVB is required, not optional: a high-output T5 tube above the screen, 12 to 15 inches over the basking spot (never under 10) for a UVI near 3. Glass blocks UVB, mesh costs a quarter to a half. Replace on schedule; check surface temps with a temp gun.

04

Humidity & Water

Hold humidity at 60–80%. In an enclosure this size that comes less from misting and more from design: a deep, moisture-holding substrate layer, a large water tub, and decent ventilation so it's humid without being swampy. Tegus drink, soak, and frequently defecate in their water, so the tub gets dumped and refilled daily. If shed starts sticking on toes and tail, humidity is running low. Fix the substrate moisture before reaching for a spray bottle.

05

Substrate, Digging & Brumation

Tegus are earth-movers. Give them a deep, diggable substrate mix that holds a burrow. That isn't decor; it's how they thermoregulate, sleep, and cycle. From subadulthood on, that depth also serves brumation: most Argentine tegus cool down, bury in, and go dormant for part of the winter. It's normal for this species, so plan for it rather than fight it and get guidance from your breeder on first-winter timing. Between seasons, enrichment is easy: scatter-feed, rearrange, let them dig.

06

Feeding

A true omnivore with a serious appetite: whole prey like rodents, plus eggs, insects, and fruit, fed every 2–3 days. Variety is the whole game. Rotate proteins, keep fruit the side dish rather than the staple, and dust insect meals with plain calcium (no D3, no phosphorus) at most feedings. With UVB overhead, skip D3 calcium; keep the multivitamin occasional: weekly while growing, twice a month for adults. The classic mistake is loving a tegu into obesity, so feed on schedule, not on request.

07

Health Red Flags

Know the difference between brumation and illness: a cool, buried tegu in winter is normal; a warm, awake tegu refusing food and losing weight is not. The flags that can't wait: tremors, a soft or rubbery jaw, or swollen limbs, all metabolic bone disease from inadequate UVB and calcium. It's progressing while you watch. Add wheezing or bubbly mucus, sunken hips, or sores that won't close. Any of those means a reptile vet this week, not a forum thread.

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.