



Caiman Lizards

Dracaena guianensis

ADVANCED · 3-4 FT ADULT · 10-15 YR LIFESPAN · DIURNAL · SEMI-AQUATIC · SOUTH AMERICA

Few lizards look less real. Caiman lizards are heavy-bodied, semi-aquatic South Americans from tropical rainforest and savanna, built around one job: crushing snails with jaws that work like a nutcracker. The honest headline is water, and plenty of it. This is an advanced animal that needs a room-sized enclosure and a pool deep enough to swim in, not a tank on a stand. Plan the water first, because it is the part that gets planned last.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Advanced
Ambient temp	80–85 °F day, 75–80 °F night
Basking spot	90–100 °F
Humidity	70–90%
UVB	High output, required
Diet	Snails, crawfish, some fruit
Feeding cadence	Every 2–3 days
Adult size	3–4 feet
Lifespan	10–15 years



Caiman lizards turn heads at NARBC shows. Behind the armored scales is a snail specialist that needs more water than keepers expect.

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01

What You're Signing Up For

Nothing about this lizard is casual. Caiman lizards are strong, quick in the water and seriously equipped: jaws that crush snail shells, claws that dig and climb, and a thick swimming tail. They tolerate calm, purposeful handling at best. Treat one as a display animal you work around, not a pet you carry. Buy captive-bred if you can; imports arrive stressed and wormy. House them singly: two adults will contest the one pool and the one basking spot, and shell-crushing jaws do real damage.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Plan for the adult before you buy the hatchling. Even a hatchling starts at 36×18×24, and 48×24×24 is better; an adult needs 96×48×36 as a floor, and most serious keepers end up building something custom around a large pool. Every stage is horizontal, every stage needs water it can get into, and no stage belongs in a rack. If you can't commit an eight-foot footprint and a way to drain it, pass on the species.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	36×18×24	48×24×24	Big at hatching, and they need water access from day one. Never a rack.
Juvenile	60×24×24	72×30×30	A substantial water feature is required, not optional. Plan the drain now.
Subadult	72×30×30	96×36×36	Snail specialist: canned snails, eggs and some fish keep the jaws working.
Adult	96×48×36	Custom build, large pool	3–4 ft of semi-aquatic lizard. Deep water for real swimming. Expert level.

Minimums from Habitat-OS life-stage guidance for *Dracaena guianensis*. Every stage is horizontal, and none of them belong in a rack.

03

Heat, Light & UVB

Give them a real thermal spread. Ambient air sits at 80–85 °F, with a basking surface at 90–100 °F so a soaked lizard can haul out and dry all the way through. Nights fall to 75–80 °F. High-output UVB is required, not decorative: a heavy-bodied lizard eating shelled prey needs it to put that calcium to work. Mount the lamp over the basking platform at the maker's stated distance and replace it on schedule. Skip heat rocks entirely.

04

Humidity and Water Quality

Humidity runs 70–90%, and a big open pool under a solid-sided enclosure does most of that work, provided the air still moves; humid and stagnant is how respiratory trouble starts. These lizards swim, soak and defecate in the same pool, and it fouls fast. **Filter the pool like a fish tank and change it before it looks like it needs it.** Give depth enough to submerge and swim, with an easy exit at one end. Dirty water buys you skin and eye infections.

05

Substrate and Furniture

Keep the land side simple and strong. A deep, moisture-holding mix of cypress mulch and soil holds humidity without going sour. Skip loose sand at every age, and never with a young animal. Everything they climb has to hold a heavy, clumsy lizard, so anchor branches and platforms rather than wedging them. Wild caiman lizards bask on limbs above water, so a solid branch over the pool earns its space. Plan on stripping substrate often; a semi-aquatic setup gets filthy.

06

Feeding a Snail Specialist

This is the part that decides whether you can keep one. Caiman lizards are snail specialists, and those jaws exist to crush shells. Feed every 2–3 days: canned snails as the backbone, with crawfish and other shellfish, whole eggs, some fish and a little fruit. Don't collect wild snails: parasites and garden pesticide are both real risks. Sourcing a steady supply of shell-on prey is the real ongoing cost of this species. Line that up before the lizard arrives.

07

Health Red Flags

Watch the water line and the mouth. Blistered belly scales, cloudy or swollen eyes, or weeping around the jaws all point back at dirty water or a basking spot that never gets hot enough. A lizard that stops hauling out to bask has already told you something is wrong. Tremors or a rubbery jaw point at UVB and calcium; weight loss on full rations points at parasites. Any of that is a reptile-vet visit, and every new import deserves a fecal check.

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.