



Helmeted Geckos

Tarentola chazaliae

INTERMEDIATE · 3–4 IN ADULT · 8–12 YR LIFESPAN · NOCTURNAL · COASTAL NORTH AFRICA

A gecko the size of your thumb, wearing a stone helmet. Helmeted geckos come off the Atlantic coast of North Africa, where night fog rolls over dry scrub, and that is the whole story of keeping them: desert warmth by day, cool and slightly damp after dark. They are calm and nocturnal, and small enough that a careless grab does real damage. Uncommon in American collections; European keepers have had them figured out for years.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Intermediate
Adult size	3–4 inches
Ambient temp	78–85 °F
Basking surface	88–92 °F
Night drop	68–74 °F
Humidity	40–60%
UVB	Low to moderate
Diet & cadence	Insects, every 2–3 days
Lifespan	8–12 years



Captive-bred helmeted geckos turn up in small numbers at NARBC tables. The blunt, heavy head that names the species is the giveaway.
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01

Small, Calm, and Easy to Hurt

Helmeted geckos are placid animals in a body three to four inches long. That calm tempts people into handling, and the size is exactly why you shouldn't do much of it. A startled gecko this small can fall from hand height, and the tail comes off under pressure. Handle for health checks and moves, low over a table, and let the rest be watching. They rate intermediate because the margins are thin, not because the routine is hard.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Footprint beats height. These are ground geckos that work rock and scrub, so wide and shallow wins over tall. A subadult settles into 12×12×12 inches, but an adult's floor is 18×12×12, and 24×12×12 is where the gradient gets honest. Racks suit small stock only if cover and gradient survive the move. House them one to a box: in a footprint this tight the dominant animal owns every warm hide, the other one quietly starves, and squabbles cost tails.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	8×8×8	12×8×8	Small and secretive. Rock or cork cover from day one, not later.
Juvenile	12×8×8	12×12×12	Coastal species: handles modest humidity better than true desert geckos.
Subadult	12×12×12	18×12×12	Slow growers. Don't rush the upsize; floor space beats height.
Adult	18×12×12	24×12×12	Tops out near 3.5 inches. Wide footprint, real gradient, low ceiling.

Enclosure sizes in inches, from Habitat-OS life-stage guidance. The minimum is a floor, not a target.

03

Heat, Light, and the Night Drop

Hold an ambient of 78–85 °F through the day, put a basking surface of 88–92 °F at the warm end, and let nights fall to 68–74 °F. That drop is not neglect; it is the climate they came from, and it belongs in the routine. **Every heat source runs through a thermostat.** Skip heat rocks entirely. Nocturnal does not mean lightless, so run a low to moderate UVB lamp over the warm end on a normal day and night cycle.

04

Humidity & Water

Forty to sixty percent is the target, and it is the detail that separates this gecko from the desert species it resembles. Atlantic fog keeps its home range damper than the Sahara behind it. A light evening mist on one end, dry again by morning, gets you there. Keep a shallow water dish topped up. What this gecko will not forgive is stale, permanently damp air, so ventilate well and let the warm end dry out properly between mistings.

05

Ground, Cover, and Clutter

A sand and soil mix that holds its shape works well, deep enough to scrape into and not so fine that it dusts. No loose sand for hatchlings or juveniles: keep them on a firmer substrate or paper while they are small and swallowing whatever they hunt on. Clutter the floor with flat rock, cork bark and leaf litter. Seat rock stacks on the enclosure floor so digging cannot topple them. These geckos are secretive, and one with nowhere to hide lives stressed and out of sight.

06

Feeding

Small insects, often. Crickets and mealworms carry the diet, waxworms as an occasional extra rather than a staple, and nothing offered should be wider than the space between the gecko's eyes. Feed every 2–3 days, at the short end of that window for growing animals. Dust with calcium at most meals and work a multivitamin into the rotation. Gut-load the insects first: a cricket straight from the tub is a hollow meal, and a 3.5-inch gecko carries no reserves worth spending.

07

Health Red Flags

On an animal this small, decline moves fast. Start at the tail: it is the savings account, and one that visibly thins is a problem now, not later. Then look for sunken eyes, skin that stays tented when pinched, stuck shed ringing the toes, a soft or rubbery jaw, and tremors. A nocturnal gecko sitting out at midday is telling you something too. Any of that means a reptile vet. Weigh monthly and trust the scale.

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.