



Western Chuckwalla

Sauromalus obesus

Chuckwalla's are medium sized, active and diurnal lizards. They have the added bonus of thriving on a vegetarian diet, although mine do eat the occasional insect or wax worm. They are therefore ideally suited to the reptile keeper that would rather not deal with live food items. They grow to around 400mm in length and are the second largest lizard native to the United States. They are easily kept in captivity and are fairly to easy to breed in captivity.

There natural range in the wild covers Arizona, Mexico and Texas. An ideal Chuckwalla habitat has lots of rocks and crevices to hide in and bask on with warm days and often cold nights. Colour varies vastly from region to region; but generally, the males are brighter in colour than the females, with males ranging from a brick-red to almost entirely black with a yellowish tail. Females are usually a uniform grey/brown colour.

Selecting Your Chuckwalla:-

Captive bred Chuckwalla's can be in short supply in the UK as there are not currently many breeders. This may change as they are gaining in popularity, but for the time being you might have to wait to find the right Chuckwalla for you. I would strongly advise against wild caught or captive farmed animals, as these are likely to adapt poorly to captivity and have more health problems. It is best to wait a few months to find the right animal rather than diving in and buying the first one offered to you.

When purchasing a Chuckwalla it is recommended to go to a reputable reptile shop or breeder. They will be only too happy to let you see the selection of Chuckwalla's they have available. Chuckwallas should be bright, alert and appear strong with their head held up. and be confident with handling although hatchlings often take a minute or two to settle down. If they have had limited handling previously they may be initially fast and a little difficult to handle but will quickly calm down with regular gentle handling. In my experience Chuckwalla's will happily live in groups so long as there are no more than one male present. Males will get territorial and fight, especially during the breeding season. Sexing Chuckwallas can be difficult when young, so if more than one is purchased a owner needs to be prepared to separate them if they both turn out to be males or fighting starts.

Housing:-

Chuckwalla's are very active lizards with lots of energy. They will spend a large percentage of the day moving around the vivarium, and need plenty of space to allow natural behavior. The minimum sized vivarium for one or two Chuckwallas

is 48" x 24" x 24". A wooden vivarium is recommended, as they are better insulated than glass or plastic vivariums, it is therefore much easier to get the heating set up correctly. A wooden vivarium will offer more privacy for the Chuckwalla, as they only have a glass front.

Heating:-

Chuckwalla's have relatively simple heating requirements. They are suited to high day time temperatures with a hot basking spot and cooler temperatures at night. This can be achieved by using a spot bulb (60-100W depending on ambient temp of room) on one side of the vivarium, directed at a large stone to produce a basking area. The temperature in the basking spot should be 110 - 115²F. There should be a gradient down to around 75²F in the cool end of the vivarium. At night the temperature can safely drop to 60-65²F and this is achieved by turning off the spot bulb for at least 8 hours at night. It is important there are no lights used at night as this disrupts the day/night photoperiod and stresses the lizard.

It is vitally important to guard the spot bulb to prevent the Chuckwalla from touch it. Serious burns can result from un-guarded heat lamps which are very simple to avoid.

It is very important to know what the temperature is, so check regularly with an accurate thermometer. Ideally use two maximum/minimum thermometers per vivarium (one at each end of the vivarium), or you can use an in/out, max/min thermometer and place 1 sensor at each end. Do not guess or take temperature by hand (if it feels warm or cold), this is not accurate enough.

Lighting:-

Chuckwallas require UV light to help use calcium from their diet and prevent Metabolic Bone Disease. We recommend using a lamp with 10-12% UVb such as Zoo Meds ReptiSun 10.00 or the Arcadia D3+. UV lights should be mounted directly above the dragons, at a maximum of 12inches above the main area. It is recommended to replace UV lights every 6 months due to a decline in UV output. Please follow this link for more information www.uvguide.co.uk .

Water:-

Chuckwalla's get much of their water from the fresh fruit and vegetables that they feed on but they may often choose to drink from a shallow water bowl. This should be changed every day to prevent it from getting stagnant. The water bowl should be placed on the cool side of the vivarium to prevent it causing a large increase in humidity inside the vivarium. Chuckwalla's are adapted to live in dry arid areas and will be prone to respiratory infections if the humidity is too high.

Hides and Decor:-

Chuckwalla's will appreciate a well decorated vivarium with lots of rocks and branches to scabble over. Live plants are a bad idea as they will dry out and die

in the high temperature and they may also be eaten by your lizard and many species are potentially toxic. It is also important to make sure the rocks are secure and not going to fall. Chuckwallas love to squeeze themselves into tiny crevasses and gaps in rocks and can easily dislodge an unstable rock onto themselves or a cage mate.

Feeding:-

Chuckwallas are mainly herbivores so require a mixed diet of salad, vegetables and a little fruit. Leafy salads, such as Rocket, Water Cress, Dandelions and mixed salads are readily available and easy to use. Try to offer variety to keep a balanced diet. Salads should be offered every day. Regular use of vitamin/mineral supplements is very important to prevent problems such as Metabolic Bone Disease, which is a calcium deficiency. This is a serious condition and can occur very rapidly in young Chuckwallas that are growing quickly. Insects such as crickets and locust, and meal worms/wax worms can be offered occasionally as a treat. They are high in protein and should not be given too often. Some Chuckwallas love an occasional insect or wax worm and some may just ignore them.

Vivarium Maintenance:-

Chuckwallas can produce quite a lot of waste so the vivarium and decorations should be cleaned regularly. Clean and refill the water bowl on a daily basis. Depending on cage conditions, remove all substrate & cage furniture and completely disinfect using reptile safe disinfectant. Rinse the enclosure thoroughly and allow too dry before replacing cage furniture and your dragon.

Shedding:-

Chuckwallas shed their skin as they grow and will do so a little at a time. They rarely have any problems shedding.

This article has been written for Evolution Reptiles by [Thomas Dutton](#), who is currently studying at The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies in Edinburgh. He is very keen and knowledgeable on reptiles. When his studies allows he assist us at Evolution Reptiles and has helped us develop the company over the years.

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