



Savannah Monitor Care

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General Information

Native Habitat: African savannah

Scientific Name: *Varanus exanthematicus*

Lifespan: 8-15 years

Adult Length: 3-4'

Housing

Juvenile savannah monitors should be started in a 20 gallon tank. When full grown they will need a 75 gallon or larger enclosure, preferably 8-10 feet long, 4-5 feet wide and at least 2 feet tall. Enclosures should be easy to clean, safe and escape-proof. They are ground dwelling lizards so floor space is preferred over height. Savannah monitors are best kept solitary to prevent injuries and breeding.

Particulate substrate such as orchid bark, sand and compressed fiber is not recommended as it can lead to gastrointestinal impaction if your monitor eats it. I recommend outdoor carpet, butcher paper, tile, linoleum or newspaper.

A dig box should be provided in part of the enclosure as savannah monitors love to dig and burrow. They can be filled with slightly moistened top soil that has no additives, and should be large enough for the monitor to turn around in. They can be 1-2 feet in depth.

Multiple hide boxes should be provided that are large enough for your savannah monitor to enter and exit easily on the warm and cool ends of the enclosure.

Lighting

A basking site should be provided that reaches 95-105 degrees Fahrenheit. Their temperature gradient should be between 78-85 degrees Fahrenheit in their enclosure during the day, and can drop to 75 degrees Fahrenheit or so at night. A night bulb may be required if the temperature drops below this. Temperatures should be closely monitored with a thermometer that has a probe or an infrared temperature gun. Thermostats are useful to make sure appropriate temperatures are maintained when heating large areas.

A lower radiation 5.0 UVB bulb is recommended to prevent calcium deficiency. UVB options include compact coiled bulbs and linear fluorescent bulbs. Most UVB sources need to be changed every 6 months, even if the light is still working. The UVB bulb should be placed closest to where the monitor spends most of its time, and should not be put behind glass or plastic. The savannah monitor should be able to sit within 6-12" of the UVB source and should have an inclined surface to provide a gradient of exposure.

Water

Fresh water should be provided at all times for your monitor. You can give them a dish large enough for them to soak as well as long as it is changed regularly. They will often use their water dish as a bathroom. To entice natural behavior and assist with shedding, your monitor can be soaked in a large bin 2-3 times weekly.

Humidity should be kept between 45-60% in the enclosure. Use a hygrometer with a probe to measure humidity. You may mist the enclosure 2-3 times daily manually or with a misting system. Additional water bowls can be provided to increase humidity as well.

Diet

A varied diet should be provided for your carnivorous savannah monitor. Juveniles can be fed daily while sub-adults under 2 years can be offered food 3-4 times a week. Mature adults can be fed 1-2 times weekly. Options for staple feeders include dubia roaches and crickets. Other options that can be provided include earth worms, red wigglers, mealworms and super worms. Mature adults can be given frozen thawed mice of appropriate size, insects, and occasional hard-boiled eggs. Some savannah monitors will readily take commercial feed such as Mazuri carnivore which can be offered in addition to the other feed items.

Calcium powder that contains no phosphorous should be used to dust the food 1-2 times weekly. A multivitamin should be used to dust the food once weekly.

Handling

Savannah monitors should always be supported under their chests and hind limbs when picked up. They feel most comfortable if they have a surface to put their feet on. These monitors are very smart and often need a variety of enrichment to keep them busy. Some options include altering their environment every once in a while such as adding new items or rearranging, giving them opportunities to forage for their food or providing different smells in the form of spices or substrates can be beneficial to their mental health.

Common Health Issues

- Obesity: This occurs in many monitors due to overfeeding. A variety of feeder insects should be provided, and fattier feeders should be given only occasionally. Regular checkups with your veterinarian should be scheduled to be sure your monitor is not overweight. They can work with you on your pet's diet schedule to help control their weight.
- Intestinal parasites: Many of the feeder insects that reptiles carry can harbor intestinal parasites that may be transmitted to your reptile. They can also obtain gastrointestinal parasites by contacting other reptiles. A small number of these parasites may normally inhabit your reptile's gastrointestinal tract without any problems. However with overgrowth of these parasites they can cause a problem. They can cause malabsorption of nutrients, inappetence, lethargy and abnormal stool production. A few of the common parasites encountered include pinworms, coccidia, and flagellated protozoa. A fecal exam is recommended yearly for your reptile to screen for any abnormal amounts of GI parasites.
- Secondary Nutritional Hyperparathyroidism: This disease process is caused by improper husbandry with some possibilities including lack of calcium or vitamin D3 in the diet, excess phosphorous in the diet and absence of a UVB light source. A majority of reptiles need calcium added to their diet in the form of a Calcium powder (no phosphorous) used to dust the insects a few times weekly. In order to process this calcium, a UVB light source is typically needed. When there is an imbalance in the calcium and phosphorous, the body increases the breakdown of calcium stores from the animal's bones in order to maintain appropriate calcium levels. In an animal this can cause significant deformation of the skeleton including bowing of the legs, shortening of the snout, and stunting of growth. The bones become fragile and are prone to fractures. As calcium is needed for many bodily functions, such as muscle contraction, the animal may become weak, lethargic, and anorexic when the body can no longer maintain its calcium levels. This is a process that can typically be remedied with improvement in husbandry and long term calcium supplementation under veterinary supervision. In severe cases, hospitalization may be required to give the animal the best chance at recovery.
- Thermal burns: When inappropriate in-tank heaters such as hot rocks are used, or if external heating such as a heat pad is not regulated with a thermostat, reptiles can often end up with significant thermal burns. These burns often need long term treatment to prevent secondary infection and promote healing of this tissue.