

# Adrian's Reptile World

## Boyd's Forest Dragon (Gonocephalus boydi)

**DESCRIPTION:** A large, laterally compressed agamid with a wedge-shaped head. Generally brown or grey with some specimens having a greenish tinge. Adorned with a yellow dewlap edged with enlarged spines. There are also plates on the cheeks and spines on top of the crest. A dorsal crest consisting of pointed scales runs down to the base of the tail. Male SVL = 160mm; female SVL=145mm.

**DISTRIBUTION:** The Boyd's Forest Dragon is restricted to the wet tropics area of north Queensland - from just south of Cooktown extending south to Paluma (just north of Townsville), and out to the Atherton Tablelands in areas still covered with tropical rainforest.

Highland specimens, particularly mature males, may be a little larger and have more colorful head adornments than their lowland counterparts. Neither highland nor lowland populations are found outside tropical rainforest.

**ECOLOGY:** Diurnal or day active, this species spends most of its time in trees where it constantly scans the forest floor and adjacent trees for insects. However, due to its cryptic colouration and habit of hiding behind tree trunks, it is very hard to spot and usually goes unnoticed by bush walkers. Lizards may have several favourite trees within their territory to which they regularly return.

Boyd's Forest Dragons are unusual among lizards in that they do not thermoregulate by basking. Instead, they allow their body temperatures to fluctuate according to the conditions in the forest. They have been recorded during the day with a body temperature of between 19 and 30 degrees Celsius. However, activity seems to be regulated by the amount of daylight present in the forest rather than temperature. Known predators include Grey Goshawks and the feral pig but they are most likely eaten by snakes as well.

**DIET:** Ants, beetles, crickets, cockroaches, spiders, grasshoppers, earthworms, slugs and possibly fruit.

**BREEDING BIOLOGY:** Forest dragons are territorial with males being noticeably larger than females. A male's territory is approximately 1000 square metres and usually contains two or more smaller female territories. In the wild, mating occurs in early spring and clutch sizes of up to 5 eggs have been recorded. Lizards in lowland rainforest probably produce multiple clutches in a season (October-February) while highland animals (where lower temperatures slow metabolic rates) lay one clutch per year containing a greater number of larger eggs. Gravid females select laying locations that receive some direct sunlight such as in canopy gaps created by tree falls or beside roads. Nests consist of a shallow burrow covered in a few centimeters of soil and leaf litter. Natural incubation times are in the order of two months.

### **CARE SHEET TWO - Page 1**

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**CAPTIVE HUSBANDRY:** Boyds Forest dragons should not be kept in small cages. They require a decent sized patch of 'forest floor' within their cage to feed and they also need a nice tangle of branches and vines to make them feel secure. For an adult pair, an enclosure should not be smaller than 2000mm x 1000m x1000m. Males should not be housed together or they will be in a constant state of stress and may even engage in combat.

A waterfall feature is recommended not only to ensure sufficient humidity within the enclosure but also to encourage your lizards to drink. Simply placing a water bowl within the enclosure is not enough. Shredded coconut fibre or sphagnum moss make good substrates as they do not rot or mould and retain moisture well.

A 5% UV bulb should be provided at one end of the enclosure. A basking light can be useful but not essential as these lizards do not thermoregulate. However, the temperature of the enclosure should not be allowed to drop below 18 degrees Celsius or they may develop respiratory problems. Heat tape under or within the enclosure can help moderate the temperature at the right level.

Forest dragons can be fed crickets, wood roaches, superworms and earthworms which should be dusted with a calcium-phosphate supplement every second feed. During the breeding season females can be fed the occasional pink mouse which will assist in egg production. However, pinkies are recommended only sparingly as such high protein foods are not natural and if fed frequently may eventually lead to organ failure.

During the breeding season, males will chase and display to females by flaring their yellow dewlaps. They may even bite females around the neck area to force them into submission.

Females should be provided with a patch of damp substrate in which to lay. A mixture of peat moss and coconut fibre works well.

Eggs should be removed and incubated artificially in vermiculite (50/50 ratio by weight). At 26 degrees Celsius they will hatch in about 10 weeks. Increasing incubation temperature will result in few or no hatchlings. Babies can be started on small crickets and woodies and will grow to maturity in about 3 years. Under optimal conditions, they can live for up to 15 years in captivity.

It should be noted that these lizards are prone to develop calcium deficiencies in captivity. Symptoms may include a jutting lower jaw, kinks and lumps, lethargy, loss of appetite and emaciation. Calcium deficient females will not lay eggs. Ensuring that insect prey is dusted with a supplement powder every second feed is essential for the well being of this species.

## **CARE SHEET TWO - Page 2**

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Recommended for experienced keepers only.

References:

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Torr, G., A. 1997 Forest Dragons. Nature Australia Magazine, 1997, 25(8): 33-39

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**CARE SHEET TWO - Page 3**

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