

Characteristic Features and Feeding Methods of *Beaded Dragons*

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Perspective

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ABOUT THE STUDY

Beaded Dragons are lizards, in the genus *Pogona*, that are native to Australia. Bearded dragons are often kept as exotic pets, especially the Inland Bearded Dragon (species *Pogona vitticeps*). These pets are also affectionately called "beardies" by those who breed or raise them. They are a popular breed among children because of their friendly and calm nature.

Characteristics

Bearded dragons have broad triangular heads and flattened bodies with adults reaching approximately 18 to 24 inches head-to-tail. When threatened they will expand a spiny pouch under their jaw and turn it black, as well as inhale air and puff up to make them appear larger. The pouch resembles a beard lending the animal their name. Males are often slightly larger than females with a broader head in proportion to their bodies, but females are often slightly more heavily set. Bearded dragons have a distinctive series of lateral spines (specialized scales) radiating horizontally from the head to the base of the tail. Their color ranges from light tan to dark brown depending on their native soil often with highlights of black, brilliant red, or gold and can change somewhat depending upon their internal condition. Some captive populations have been selectively bred for more brilliant colorations. As juveniles, they spend some of their time in trees. Adults are usually ground dwelling but will climb trees to bask and search for prey. Bearded dragons occupy a large range of habitats in their native environment from the desert to dry forests and scrublands.

Feeding

Bearded dragons are omnivorous requiring both insects and vegetable food. A typical diet for captive bearded dragons includes leafy greens and vegetables, and regular meals of feeder insects.

Diet includes crickets, roaches, locusts, silkworms, hornworms, butterworms, and phoenix worms. The mealworm has fairly hard chitin (exoskeleton) and is generally low in the "chitin to meat" ratio making it less nutritious than other feeder insects. Chitin is hard enough that large amounts of it can cause impaction in the bearded dragon's digestion system and can lead to death, especially in younger animals. Waxworms can be given as a treat, but no more than 1 or 2 a week in most cases as they are extremely fatty and in some cases very addictive. The rule of thumb on feeder insects is that the food fed to the animal must not be larger than the space between the eyes. Feeding something larger could make it hard for the animal to swallow the food and can lead to the aforementioned fatal impaction.

Before being offered to the dragon, it is recommended that insects be fed for at least 24 hours in advance, or as they are called "gut-loaded" to increase their nutritional value. Commercial cricket foods for gut-loading are available, but many household food items may be used instead, such as a half a slice of potato or carrot. It is essential that most of the dragon's food (especially livefood) first be dusted with a phosphorus-free commercial calcium supplement, as bearded dragons are susceptible to Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD) if their calcium and vitamin D3 requirements are not met. A vitamin supplement should also be applied, but no more than twice a week as overuse can also cause health problems.

Insects caught in the wild are not recommended, due to the increased risk of pesticide exposure and parasites. Fireflies and all other animals with bioluminescence chemicals can be fatal to bearded dragons.