

Jackson's Chameleon

Care Guide for New Owners

Jackson's Chameleon

Reptile

Intermediate Level

Live-Bearing

Quick Facts at a Glance

Species	Trioceros jacksonii (three subspecies; T. j. jacksonii most common)
Lifespan	5 to 10 years with proper care
Adult Size	Males: 9 to 13 inches; Females: 7 to 10 inches
Activity Cycle	Diurnal; active during the day
Temperament	Generally calmer than other chameleons; still prefer minimal handling
Enclosure	Minimum 24x24x48 inches tall; screen enclosure required
Basking Temp	80 to 85 degrees F basking spot; cooler than many reptiles
Ambient Temp	70 to 78 degrees F warm; 60 to 68 degrees F cool side
Nighttime Temp	55 to 65 degrees F; cooler nights are important for this species
Humidity	50 to 80 percent; misting multiple times daily
UVB	T5 HO UVB required; Ferguson Zone 2 to 3
Legal Status	Legal in Wisconsin; verify local ordinances

Meet the Jackson's Chameleon

Jackson's chameleons are best known for the three horns that males carry on their face, giving them a striking resemblance to a tiny triceratops. They are native to East African cloud forests and have a care profile that is significantly different from most other chameleon species kept in captivity, particularly in their temperature preferences, which are cooler than most.

One of the most notable features of Jackson's chameleons is that they are live-bearing, or ovoviviparous. Females give birth to live young rather than laying eggs, which is unusual among chameleons. This eliminates egg-binding as a concern for females but means that an unintentionally mated female may give birth to a large litter of neonates that require their own care.

Temperature Is the Most Critical Difference

Jackson's chameleons come from cool East African cloud forests at elevation. They cannot tolerate the high temperatures that are appropriate for panther or veiled chameleons. Temperatures consistently above 85 degrees F will stress and eventually kill a Jackson's chameleon. If your home runs warm, this species may not be appropriate for your situation.

Wild Collection and Hawaii Populations

Jackson's chameleons were introduced to Hawaii in the 1970s and have established feral populations there. Hawaiian-origin Jackson's chameleons have historically been a significant source of animals in the US pet trade. These animals are wild-caught, stressed, parasitized, and often in poor health. Always seek captive-bred Jackson's chameleons from reputable breeders.

Where They Come From

Jackson's chameleons are native to the cool, humid montane forests of Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa, where they live at elevations between 1,600 and 3,000 meters. The climate at these elevations is mild and misty, with temperatures that rarely exceed 80 degrees F and often drop into the 50s at night. This cloud forest environment, with its consistent moisture, moderate temperatures, and rich insect life, defines the conditions they require in captivity.

Legal Considerations

Jackson's chameleons are legal to own in Wisconsin. They are listed on CITES Appendix II, regulating but not prohibiting international trade. Captive-bred animals within the US are not subject to import restrictions. Verify local ordinances before adopting.

Enclosures

Screen enclosures are required for Jackson's chameleons for the same reasons as all chameleons: ventilation is essential and glass enclosures cause respiratory infections. The minimum enclosure for an adult male is 24x24x48 inches tall. Females can be housed in 24x24x36 inches. Place the enclosure at eye level or higher. House each chameleon separately and out of visual range of other chameleons.

Jackson's chameleons appreciate a heavily planted enclosure with dense cover. Their cloud forest origins mean they feel most secure with abundant foliage to hide in. Pothos, ficus, schefflera, and hibiscus are all suitable plants. Branches of varying diameters throughout the full height of the enclosure give perching options at different temperature and humidity zones.

Temperature: The Key Difference

Jackson's chameleons require significantly cooler temperatures than panther or veiled chameleons. This is the care requirement that most commonly catches new owners off guard, particularly those who previously kept warmer-climate reptiles.

Target Temperatures

Basking spot: 80 to 85 degrees F maximum. This is the upper limit, not the target.

Warm side ambient: 70 to 78 degrees F.

Cool side ambient: 60 to 68 degrees F.

Nighttime: 55 to 65 degrees F. Nighttime cooling is important for this species' health.

A low-wattage incandescent or halogen bulb creates the basking spot. Use a thermostat or dimmer to prevent overheating. In warm climates or during summer, keeping the enclosure cool enough can require active cooling measures such as air conditioning, a cool mist humidifier, or ice packs placed near the enclosure.

UVB Lighting

Jackson's chameleons require UVB but at a lower intensity than panther chameleons, corresponding to their cloud forest habitat where sunlight is filtered by mist and canopy. Use a T5 HO bulb rated for Zone 2 to 3, such as the Arcadia T5 HO 6 percent. Mount appropriately within the screen enclosure and replace every 6 months.

Humidity and Hydration

Jackson's chameleons come from one of the most consistently humid environments of any chameleon species. Maintain humidity between 50 and 80 percent with misting at least twice daily. Like all chameleons, they drink from water droplets on leaves and branches rather than from a standing dish. An automated misting system and a dripper system together provide the most reliable hydration options. Monitor for drinking behavior and watch for signs of dehydration including sunken eyes and lethargy.

Diet and Supplementation

Jackson's chameleons eat a variety of feeder insects. The same principles apply as for panther chameleons: variety, gut-loading, and careful supplementation are all essential. Dubia roaches, crickets, black soldier fly larvae, hornworms, and silkworms are all appropriate feeders. Avoid fireflies (toxic), wild-caught insects (pesticide risk), and insects larger than the space between the chameleon's eyes.

Supplementation follows the same general schedule as other chameleons: calcium without D3 at most feedings, multivitamin every two weeks, and calcium with D3 every two weeks. Because Jackson's chameleons live in lower-UV environments than panther chameleons, take care not to over-supplement D3.

Live-Bearing Reproduction

Female Jackson's chameleons give birth to live young rather than laying eggs. A single litter can contain 8 to 30 neonates. If you have an unintentionally mated female, be prepared for the responsibility of caring for or rehoming a potentially large litter. Neonates require their own small screen enclosures, appropriate food (extra-small feeder insects like fruit flies and pinhead crickets), and the same humidity and temperature conditions as adults.

Common Health Issues

Heat Stress

The most common cause of illness in Jackson's chameleons kept by keepers not familiar with their specific temperature needs. Signs include open-mouth breathing, dark coloration, lethargy, and loss of appetite. Any sustained temperature above 85 degrees F is dangerous. Evaluate and correct the enclosure temperature immediately.

Dehydration

Sunken eyes, lethargy, yellow or orange urates, and skin that does not spring back are signs of dehydration. Increase misting frequency and assess the dripper system. Dehydration in chameleons is a rapid emergency.

Metabolic Bone Disease

Caused by inadequate UVB or calcium. Signs include rubbery bones, tremors, and difficulty gripping branches. Correct UVB and supplementation from day one prevents it entirely.

Respiratory Infections

Common in improperly ventilated enclosures. Glass enclosures are a primary risk factor. Screen enclosures with good airflow prevent most respiratory infections.

Parasites

Internal parasites are common, particularly in wild-caught Hawaiian animals. Annual fecal exams are strongly recommended. Any thin, lethargic, or abnormal-stool chameleon should be seen by a vet.

Neonatal Mortality

Neonate Jackson's chameleons are extremely fragile. They require perfectly calibrated humidity, temperature, and tiny feeder insects. Mortality in the first weeks of life is common even with excellent care.

Things Every New Jackson's Chameleon Owner Should Know

Cool temperatures are not a mistake.

Jackson's chameleons need to be cool. If your enclosure is running at 90 degrees F, your chameleon is suffering. 80 to 85 degrees F is the basking spot maximum, not the ambient temperature.

Always source captive-bred.

Hawaiian wild-caught Jackson's chameleons dominate the market in some areas. They are stressed, parasitized, and have poor survival rates. Seek out captive-bred animals from breeders who know what they are doing.

Screen enclosures are mandatory.

Glass causes respiratory infections in chameleons. Use a well-ventilated screen enclosure and place it in a room with good airflow.

They prefer not to be handled.

Jackson's chameleons tolerate handling better than some other species, but they are still observation animals who are most content when left in their enclosure. Handle minimally and calmly.

Pregnant females need their own space.

A female about to give birth needs a quiet, undisturbed enclosure and should not be handled in the final weeks of pregnancy.

Find a chameleon-experienced exotic vet.

Chameleon medicine is specialized. Locate a knowledgeable vet before you need one.

Questions? We're Here!

Boggy's Buddies is always happy to answer questions and support you. Reach us at boggysbuddies@gmail.com or find us on Facebook and Instagram.