
THE CRESTED GECKO (*Rhacodactylus ciliatus*): HUSBANDRY AND MEDICAL CARE

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ABSTRACT

The crested gecko is a fairly recent addition to the ever-growing popular pet reptile market. The species was first described in 1866 as *Correlophus ciliatus*, but has now been renamed to *Rhacodactylus ciliatus*.¹ Until 1994 they were believed to be extinct, but the species was rediscovered. Because of their ease of care they can be considered as some of the healthiest and most trouble free of all reptiles to keep.²⁻⁴

The crested gecko or New Caledonian crested gecko as it is sometimes referred to, has hair-like projections above the eyes, which look like eyelashes. The toes and the tip of the tail are covered with small hairs called setae, which are essential for climbing on smooth surfaces. In addition to the hairs, the toes have claws for climbing on surfaces to which their toes cannot cling with the hairs.

The crested gecko is primarily found in the southern part of New Caledonia. As with most geckos, the crested gecko has no true eyelids and keeps its eyes moist by using its tongue to clear away debris.

Like all *Rhacodactylus* geckos, crested geckos have webbing on the legs and digits. This is most likely due to the fact that they are an arboreal species. This should be taken into consideration when keep them in a vivarium, and a vertical stratification is highly recommended. A good vivarium should be 4-6 feet tall however they also do well in small enclosures such a 20 gal high (24" × 12" × 16"). Good ventilation is important just as with all tropical species. The temperature does not need to be significantly higher than standard room temperature (75°F, 25 °C) and most people do not install separate heating elements for the vivarium. Misting the vivarium on a daily basis will help to keep a relative high humidity. The main problem of a low humidity level is dysecdysis.

Some experts recommend winter cooling and others do not think it is adequate. No negative effects have been reported on either husbandry practice. Most breeders separate the females from the males for a few months out of the year. The geckos are primarily nocturnal, and will generally spend the daylight hours sleeping in a secure hiding place close to, or on the ground, in the cage. In the wild they rarely come out of the canopy since larger geckos living in the trunk and brush will readily eat them. Due to this fact a UV light source is not really needed and they

thrive well without any special lighting. However, one of the authors (JM) generally recommends a full spectrum light source for at least 2 – 4 hr/day.

This species of gecko is a true omnivore, eating a variety of insects and fruit. Small insects should be fed in addition to fruit baby food or fruit mash, which can be easily supplemented with vitamins and minerals. There are also commercial diets on the market that can be used in lieu of baby food.

The crested gecko will not regrow its tail once lost. Autotomy is common in the wild as the cells around the base of the tail are brittle, allowing autotomy to happen immediately when threatened or caught by a predator. The loss of a tail in captivity is primarily a cosmetic problem and is not problematic from a health or husbandry concern. It has been reported that most adults in the wild do not have their tails. In captivity one health issue seems very prevalent is the floppy-tail syndrome. The tail flops to the side or over the back of the gecko when it is resting vertically in a head-down position. There is no cure for this condition but it seems that animals are not impacted by this condition. It has been speculated that the condition occurs because of extensive hanging upside down on cage furniture; however, it also appears to happen in the wild.

Currently the export of wild New Caledonian crested geckos is prohibited, but breeding in captivity is relatively easy, assuring a good supply of new animals for the pet trade without posing a threat to the wild population. This also makes them relatively parasite free.

While they have not been kept in captivity for a very long period to determine an average life span in captivity, they are thought to be able to live for up to 20 yr. The female will usually lay two eggs, which hatch 60–90 days after being laid. The reproduction is relatively high in captivity as eggs are often deposited every 4 wk if the female is healthy.

Crested geckos have a small calcium sac on the roof of the mouth, which should be visible during the physical exam. If this sac is not clearly visible, a female does not have enough calcium in her system and she is suffering from calcium deficiency. It appears that nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism can have a very rapid onset in this species. It can be seen if calcium supplementation has not been optimal for a few weeks.

In short, as mentioned above due to ease of their care and relatively few health problems, the crested gecko appears to be an optimal pet for new reptile client.

LITERATURE CITED

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