

VEILED CHAMELEON | *Chamaeleo calyptratus*

An extended care guide by Michael Andreas Jacobi

Common Name(s): Veiled or Yemen Chameleon

Experience Level: Intermediate

Range: Southwestern Saudi Arabia and western Yemen (also introduced into Florida and Hawaii)

Habitat: Varied – dry mountain plateaus, temperate mountain slopes or humid coastal plains

Habits: Highly specialized arboreal lizard

Behavior: Highly territorial and asocial; best housed alone

Temperature: Daytime 80-90°F with 95-110°F basking spot; nighttime drop to 70-75°F

Housing: A large screen enclosure designed for chameleons that is planted with *Ficus*, *Schefflera*, and Pothos and has vine or branches for additional perching spots and no substrate (bare floor). Branches should be positioned to allow the chameleon to easily move closer and farther from basking spot. An adult male will require a 24" w x 24" d x 48" h tall cage; an adult female 18" w x 18" d x 36" h.

Lighting: 12 hours/day illumination by UVB-emitting reptile fluorescent tube such as Zoo-Med's Repti-Sun™ 5.0, plus incandescent heat-emitting bulb to provide appropriate basking spot. Breeding females may require higher UVB and Zoo-Med® Repti-Sun™ 10.0 or Exo-Terra® Desert 10.0 bulbs should be considered. Mercury vapor reptile bulbs (e.g. Mega-Ray, Zoo-Med® PowerSun™ or T-Rex® UV Heat™), which provide both heat and UVA/UVB wavelengths are used by some keepers.

Captive Diet: *Omnivorous as adult:* both a variety of gut-loaded insects (crickets, silkworms, hornworms, superworms, roaches) and plant matter (dark, calcium-rich greens such as dandelion, mustard, collard and turnip; dandelion and hibiscus flowers; and some fruits [see below]) should be offered. Insects should be offered nutritious foods for at least 24 hours before offering them as food ("gut-loading") and should be dusted with Rep-Cal® with Vitamin D3 and Sticky Tongue Farms® Miner-All™ I (with D3) mineral supplements and Rep-Cal® Herptivite multivitamin at each feeding. Use just one of these at each feeding and rotate through the three. For example, use Rep-Cal® D3 on Monday, Herptivite on Wednesday, and Miner-All on Friday. Feeding insects 2-3 times a week and greens 1-2 times a week is fine for a healthy adult. Young Veiled Chameleons should be fed insects about the width of their heads, as many as they will consume within one hour, 2-3 times every day.

Comments: The Veiled Chameleon (*Chamaeleo calyptratus*) is a fairly large and colorful chameleon species from the Arabian Peninsula. This adaptable and hardy lizard has adjusted to a wide range of habitats and these traits contribute to it being an excellent introduction to captive chameleon care for the novice keeper. Although many true chameleons are demanding captives that only thrive under the care of highly experienced keepers, the Veiled Chameleon is not difficult for beginners to raise as long as guidelines

regarding housing, UVB lighting and diet and dietary supplements are followed. The relatively straightforward housing and care requirements, impressive form and interesting behavior make the Veiled Chameleon a fascinating and rewarding chameleon species for any dedicated herpetoculturist.

The Veiled Chameleon is one of the larger chameleon species in the hobby, and is easily distinguished by the tall casque rising from the head of males. These helmeted males may reach a total length approaching two feet, while females have a total length of 15-18 inches. The colorful males may be turquoise and green with irregular yellow bands, orange or copper streaks and blue spots, but most females are comparatively drab green except when displaying their "gravid coloration" of dark blackish-green with orange streaks and blue and yellow spots. Because of their greater size, impressive casque and brilliant coloration, males are more popular than females for those just wanting one specimen. Females may produce eggs even if not bred and egg-laying complications may arise, so we certainly suggest you stick to a lone male unless you are interested in breeding chameleons and want multiple specimens. Fortunately, Veiled Chameleons can be readily sexed as soon as they hatch; males have a prominent spur on the back of their hind feet that is absent in females.

Screen enclosures allow for essential airflow and open space and are best decorated with live plants, such as *Ficus* and/or *Schefflera* and assorted horizontal branches and vines. Veiled Chameleons thrive best in cages without substrate or standing water as they will not tolerate excessive humidity. Primary lighting should be provided by UVB-emitting fluorescent tubes or compact fluorescent bulbs, such as Zoo-Med® Repti-Sun™ 5.0 (for males or pets) or 10.0 (for breeding females), and a separate standard incandescent light bulb (e.g., halogen) should provide a basking spot at the upper end of the optimal temperature range. Both lights should be timer-controlled so they are on for 12 hours each day. Unlike many reptile pets, the Veiled Chameleon appreciates a nighttime drop in temperature, and no heat source is necessary during the 12 hour dark period.

Young Veiled Chameleons grow rapidly on appropriately-sized gut-loaded crickets that are dusted with a calcium supplement (*see Captive Diet above*). Adults are omnivorous and both insects and plants comprise a healthy diet. Gut-loaded and supplement-dusted crickets can supply the bulk of a veiled chameleon's insect diet, but silkworms, hornworms, superworms and roaches can be used to add variety for optimal health. Many adults lose their wariness and may even become accustomed to shooting their sticky tongues at large insects held by forceps or in their keeper's fingers. Accepted plants vary with individual preference and you should experiment to find your chameleon's favorites.

Veiled Chameleons will eat the *Ficus*, Pothos and, more rarely, *Schefflera* plants decorating their cages. Chopped calcium-rich greens (e.g., dandelion, collard, mustard, turnip) and other plants your chameleons prefer should be offered once or twice a week in an elevated dish. Flowers to try include dandelion and hibiscus. Fruit and vegetables that are relished by many Veiled Chameleons include apple, strawberries and raspberries, mango, papaya, carrot and squash.

Chameleons rarely drink still water from a bowl and drip systems and periodic misting are necessary to provide clean drinking water. Droplets of water should fall and form on leaves where the chameleon can lap them when thirsty. However, constantly running drip systems are not recommended for Veiled Chameleons, as this chameleon will not tolerate excessive humidity. Care should be taken to ensure that the cage dries out between watering. No substrate should be used so that water from misting and plant

watering does not accumulate. If a drip system is employed, the water should fall onto leaves and then be caught by a dish at the bottom of the cage that will need to be emptied regularly.

This care sheet provides only general information regarding Veiled Chameleon care. Although it provides a good foundation for successful captive husbandry, we recommend you also read one or more of the books listed below.

Recommended Reading

BARTLETT, R.D. & P. BARTLETT. 2001. *Jackson's and Veiled Chameleons: Facts & Advice on Care and Breeding* (Reptile Keeper's Guide). Barron's Educational Series.

DE VOSJOLI, P. & G. FERGUSON (eds.). 1995. Care and Breeding of Panther, Jackson's, Veiled, and Parson's Chameleons. The Herpetocultural Library, Advanced Vivarium Systems.

DORVAL, C. 2006. *Chameleons in Captivity* (Professional Breeders Series). ECO Publishing/Serpent's Tale.

JACOBI, M. & A. ORLEANS. 2010. Unveil the Mystery (Breeding Veiled Chameleons). *Reptiles* magazine, June 2010.