

American Geckos

Check out these geckos native to America.

Text and photos by Dick Bartlett

Day Geckos in the U.S.

Arguably the most beautiful geckos now found in the United States, the day geckos are unique not only for their Kelly-green coloration but because they are diurnal. The three Florida species are of Madagascar origin. At 10 inches in length, the giant day gecko (*Phelsuma madagascariensis grandis*) is the largest of this emerald quartet. It now occurs in Lee, Collier, Broward, Miami-Dade and Monroe counties, and it is often found near stands of bananas. The brilliant green dorsum of this gecko is variably adorned with bright orange.

The Florida reef gecko (*Sphaerodactylus n. notatus*) is tiny, secretive and dark in coloration.

No less colorful, the gold dust day gecko (*P. laticauda*) and the peacock day gecko (*P. quadriocellata*) are much smaller; both are adult at about 5 inches. Anterior to the orange markings on the Kelly-green back, the shoulders and nape of the gold dust day gecko are dusted with golden yellow spots. The peacock day gecko tends to be a little darker green and has a turquoise-edged purple-black spot at the apex of each leg. The gold dust day gecko also occurs on several of the Hawaiian Islands.

The orange-spotted day gecko (*P. guimbeaui*) is present on Oahu. Until it became established there, this 7-inch-long gecko occurred only on Mauritius. This is a beautiful gecko, green sided, turquoise backed and orange-spotted.

A small (to 4 1/2 inches), agile, rough-scaled gecko from North Africa is now well established on Galveston Island, Texas. This is the rough-tailed gecko (*Cyrtopodion scabrum*), long legged, slender toed, quietly colored and very fast. It probably arrived at the Galveston docks in produce or other trade and quickly acclimated to the area.

Aloha Aliens

Besides those species shared with the mainland, the Aloha State has three additional geckos of Polynesian and Micronesian origin. These are the stump-toed gecko (*Gehyra mutilata*), the tree gecko (*Hemiphyllodactylus t. typus*) and the mourning gecko (*Lepidodactylus lugubris*). All are adult when 3 to 4 inches in length, have distended toe pads and are clad in hues of brown or gray. The stump-toed and the mourning gecko are associated with both human habitations and wilderness areas, but the tree gecko shuns inhabited areas. The mourning gecko and the tree gecko are both all-female, parthenogenic species.

The mourning gecko is stocky and compact, has long toes with lamellae all the way to the palm, moderately enlarged chin shields and an annulated tail. The stump-toed gecko is also a chunky species with rather short and very broad toes with lamellae only on the distal half, greatly enlarged chin shields and enlarged scales beneath the tail. The tree gecko has no enlarged chin shields, is elongate and slender, the outermost finger is little more than a stump, and it lacks either annuli or enlarged scales beneath the tail.

West and Southwest Natives

Southern California is home to the native peninsular leaf-toed gecko (*Phyllodactylus nocticolus*), a 3-inch-long inhabitant of rocky terrain, escarpments and road-cuts. This gecko has a splay-legged gait and long toes with broadly expanded tips. It is common in some areas, but is protected by state law.

The common flying gecko (*Ptychozoon lionatum*) has recently been found in South Florida.

The remaining four U.S. gecko species (one with four subspecies) are terrestrial, eyelidded species of the family Eublepharidae. All are natives, lack toe pads and are arid-land species. The two largest species, the Big Bend gecko (*Coleonyx reticulatus*) and Switak's banded gecko (*C. switaki*), both of which may exceed a stocky 6 inches in length, are associated with boulder fields, rocky road cuts and escarpments in western Texas and Southern California respectively. Both also occur in Mexico. Adults have many large tubercular scales interspersed among small, smooth dorsal scales, and both typically have reticulations or ocelli rather than bands crossing their backs. Both are considered rare and are protected species.

At a mere 4 1/2 inches in length, the Texas banded gecko (*C. brevis*) is the smallest of the North American eublepharines. It is found from southeastern New Mexico to southern Texas and well into Mexico. Distribution separates this species from the various subspecies of the somewhat larger western banded gecko. Both the Texas and western banded geckos are

small, slender and common. They may be found in rocky terrain, but also inhabit sandy desert lands.

The western banded gecko is separated into four subspecies that range westward from extreme southwestern New Mexico to coastal Southern California and southern Utah. The subspecies include the desert banded gecko (*C. v. variegatus*), which has light markings in the center of dark bands and usually seven or fewer preanal pores; the San Diego banded gecko (*C. v. abbotti*), on which dark bands lack light centers and are the same width or slightly narrower than the light interspaces; the Tucson banded gecko (*C. v. bogerti*), which has light markings in the center of dark bands and eight or more preanal pores; and the Utah banded gecko (*C. v. utahensis*), on which dark bands are wider than the light interspaces but have irregular edges.

Keeping Geckos

Geckos are great favorites of herpetoculturists, but only about half of the U.S. species have found favor with hobbyists. Among these are the various day geckos, tokays, flying geckos, wall geckos and the two smaller species of banded geckos. Hobbyists often use house geckos as prey items for lampropeltine snakes; the tiny sphaerodactyline geckos are overlooked entirely; and the two largest species of banded geckos are protected.

Caring for geckos is easy. They require a large enough enclosure, adequate hydration, suitable warmth and a proper diet. Male geckos are very territorial, and unless the cage is very large only one male per cage is best. Although females of some species may be hierarchical, they are usually less aggressive. To prevent cannibalism, geckos within the same enclosure should be about the same size. Tailor cage size and orientation to the gecko species you're keeping. Geckos tend to be more agonistic when crunched together in a small cage. When space and budget allow, larger cages should be considered. Although a single tokay could be kept in a 10-gallon terrarium, a cage twice that size would be better and would allow you to keep a second tokay if you chose. Conversely, a 10-gallon tank is perfectly adequate for three or four house geckos, a pair of wall geckos or a colony of reef geckos.

Nocturnal geckos can provide interesting interludes for folks who work all day but are usually home after dark. At night these lizards become active, ghosting up and down the sides of their cage in search of food and drinking droplets of water misted onto the plants and other cage furniture. Day geckos, on the other hand, are aptly named. They prowl their cage during the daylight hours, catching and eating insects and eating a fruit-vitamin mixture. Feeder insects should be properly sized for the gecko species being fed, and both gut-loaded and dusted with a good vitamin D3/calcium powder. [Back to Page 1>>](#)