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African Fat-Tailed Gecko Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

African fat-tailed geckos (*Hemitheconyx caudicinctus*) are **small, terrestrial, nocturnal lizards** native to West Africa. They are closely related to leopard geckos but differ in both appearance and natural habitat preferences.

These geckos get their name from their **thick, fat-storing tails**, which serve as energy reserves during lean periods. Known for their **calm temperament and ease of handling**, African fat-tailed geckos are popular pets for reptile enthusiasts willing to meet their specific needs.

Adults typically grow **7–10 inches** long and can live **10–20 years** in captivity with excellent husbandry.

## **Housing & Environment**

African fat-tailed geckos are **ground-dwelling and crepuscular/nocturnal**, so they need secure enclosures with good floor space, hiding spots, and humidity gradients.

**Minimum enclosure size:**

* 20-gallon long tank or **24×18×12 inches** for a single adult
* Larger enclosures (e.g., 30–40 gallons) recommended for pairs or extra enrichment

**Substrate:**

* Coconut fiber, soil blends, or excavator clay help maintain humidity and support digging
* Paper towels or reptile carpet for simpler, low-risk setups
* Avoid loose sand (impaction risk)

**Enclosure features:**

* Multiple hides: at least one on warm side, one on cool side, plus a humid hide
* Low branches or decor for exploration
* Cluttered floor layout mimicking natural rocky outcrops

**Cleaning:**

* Spot-clean daily
* Replace substrate or disinfect décor monthly or as needed

## **Heating, Lighting & Humidity**

African fat-tailed geckos require **belly heat** to aid digestion and maintain proper metabolism.

**Temperature gradient:**

* **Warm side (belly heat at substrate):** 88–92°F
* **Cool side:** 72–78°F
* **Nighttime:** Can safely drop to 68–72°F

**Heating:**

* Under-tank heat mat controlled by thermostat for safe, stable belly heat
* Overhead low-wattage heat bulbs if needed, but avoid strong basking lamps that over-dry the enclosure
* Always use thermostats to prevent burns

**Lighting:**

* These geckos are nocturnal and do not need bright lights
* Low-level UVB (2–5%) is optional but may offer health benefits

**Humidity:**

* Maintain **50–70%** ambient humidity
* Provide a **humid hide** with moist sphagnum moss or damp paper towel
* Mist lightly as needed to maintain humidity levels

Monitoring with **digital thermometers and hygrometers** is recommended for accuracy.

## **Water & Hydration**

Fresh, clean water must always be available in a **shallow, sturdy dish**.

* Change water daily to avoid bacterial growth
* Clean dish regularly with reptile-safe disinfectant
* Light misting can help maintain humidity, but avoid oversaturating the enclosure

Proper hydration also supports healthy shedding.

## **Diet & Nutrition**

African fat-tailed geckos are **insectivores** requiring a varied diet of live prey.

**Staple feeder insects:**

* Crickets
* Dubia roaches
* Black soldier fly larvae

**Occasional treats:**

* Waxworms or superworms (high fat, offer sparingly)

**Feeding schedule:**

* Juveniles: Daily
* Adults: Every other day or 3–4× weekly

**Supplementation:**

* Calcium without D3: Dust insects at most feedings
* Calcium with D3: 1–2× weekly
* Multivitamin: 1× weekly

**Feeding tips:**

* Gut-load feeder insects 24–48 hours before offering
* Feed in a dish or tong-feed to monitor intake and reduce escaped insects

## **Behavior & Handling**

African fat-tailed geckos are known for being **calm, gentle, and easy to handle** with regular, respectful interactions.

**Handling guidelines:**

* Approach slowly and from the side
* Support the entire body, including the tail
* Avoid grabbing from above to reduce stress
* Keep sessions short and frequent to build trust

They rarely drop their tails, but stress or rough handling can still trigger this defense mechanism.

## **Healthcare & Veterinary Care**

Schedule an **initial veterinary exam** soon after acquisition and **annual wellness checkups** with a reptile-experienced veterinarian.

**Common health issues:**

* Metabolic bone disease (from inadequate calcium or UVB)
* Respiratory infections (often from incorrect humidity or temperatures)
* Parasites (internal and external)
* Retained shed, especially on toes or tail tip
* Obesity from overfeeding fatty insects

**Warning signs:**

* Lethargy or weakness
* Loss of appetite or weight loss
* Labored breathing or wheezing
* Abnormal or incomplete shedding
* Swelling in limbs or jaw

Prompt veterinary care improves outcomes.

## **Enrichment & Habitat Design**

Enrichment supports both **mental and physical health** for fat-tailed geckos.

**Enrichment strategies:**

* Multiple hides at different humidity levels
* Cluttered floor space with rocks, logs, and low branches
* Rotating décor to stimulate exploration
* Providing moist hides for natural digging and shedding support

A well-structured enclosure reduces stress and encourages natural behaviors.

## **Facts & FAQs**

* Named for their **thick tail**, which stores fat as an energy reserve.
* Native to **West African savanna** regions with seasonal humidity shifts.
* Generally **calmer and less skittish** than many geckos.
* Nocturnal hunters using **stealth and ambush** tactics in the wild.
* Lifespans of **10–20 years** are common with proper care.

### **Supplies & Care Checklist**

* Escape-proof enclosure (≥20-gallon long minimum)
* Under-tank heat mat with thermostat
* Digital thermometers and hygrometer
* Multiple secure hides (warm, cool, humid)
* Safe, humidity-friendly substrate (coconut fiber, soil blends)
* Water dish, cleaned daily
* Calcium with and without D3, reptile multivitamin
* Gut-loaded live feeder insects
* Feeding tongs and cleaning supplies
* Secure carrier for veterinary visits

*Yarmouth Veterinary Center*