**YVCipedia REPTILES**

Horned Lizard Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

Horned lizards, often referred to as "horny toads" due to their toad-like appearance, belong to the genus *Phrynosoma*. These small, round-bodied lizards are native to arid regions across the southwestern United States and parts of Mexico. Their name comes from the prominent, spiky scales on their heads and bodies, which help deter predators.

Despite their charming looks and unique behaviors—including the rare ability to squirt blood from their eyes when threatened—horned lizards are **extremely specialized** and **difficult to maintain in captivity**, especially due to their **dietary dependence on ants**. They are generally not recommended as beginner reptiles and are often best suited for observation in conservation or research contexts.

## **Housing & Environment**

Horned lizards are terrestrial and adapted to dry, sandy environments. They require very specific heat and light conditions to thrive.

### **Enclosure Setup**

* **Minimum size:** 20-gallon long tank for one adult; more space is better
* **Style:** Horizontal, desert-style setup with low humidity
* **Substrate:** Fine, dry sand or a sand/soil mix deep enough for shallow burrowing
* Include flat basking rocks, scattered cover, and shallow dishes for food/water
* Multiple hiding areas with visual barriers to reduce stress

### **Important Notes**

* Horned lizards **do not climb**, so vertical space is less important
* They need **low humidity, high heat, and well-draining substrate**
* Avoid overly decorative enclosures that trap moisture or overcomplicate terrain

## **Heating, Lighting & Humidity**

Horned lizards are native to hot, dry climates and need high heat and strong lighting.

### **Temperature Gradient**

* **Basking area:** 100–110°F
* **Ambient daytime:** 85–95°F
* **Cool side:** 75–80°F
* **Nighttime:** 65–75°F

Use a **basking bulb** and ensure safe placement and thermostat regulation.

### **Lighting**

* UVB is **essential**: Use a high-output T5 bulb (10–12%) for 12–14 hours/day
* Place bulbs 12–18 inches above basking areas with no glass or plastic blocking
* Replace bulbs every 6–12 months even if still producing light

### **Humidity**

* Maintain low ambient humidity: **20–40%**
* Ensure good airflow and avoid moist hides or excessive misting
* A very small moist area can be offered during shedding but should not raise tank-wide humidity

## **Diet & Nutrition**

Horned lizards are **dietary specialists**, feeding primarily on **harvester ants** in the wild. This makes captive care challenging.

### **Feeding Guidelines**

* Feed small meals **daily** for juveniles, every other day for adults
* Prey should be small and soft-bodied
* Hydration and calcium are critical

### **Recommended Diet**

* **Harvester ants** (preferred, but difficult to source safely)
* Flightless fruit flies, small crickets, black soldier fly larvae
* Termites, small roaches (as variety only—not staple)
* Commercial feeder insects must be **gut-loaded**
* **Dust prey lightly with calcium** 2–3 times per week and multivitamin weekly

**Important:** Avoid waxworms, superworms, or other fatty prey.

## **Water & Hydration**

Horned lizards often get water from dew or rain droplets in the wild.

* Offer a shallow water dish with fresh, dechlorinated water
* Light misting once a week may help simulate natural hydration (avoid raising humidity)
* Ensure they are drinking—signs of dehydration include sunken eyes, lethargy, and skin tenting

## **Behavior & Handling**

Horned lizards are generally docile but **not social** and should not be handled frequently. Their bodies are fragile, and stress can cause serious health problems.

* Observe rather than interact—gentle, occasional handling only
* Support their full body when necessary
* Avoid startling or loud environments

They are **solitary** and should be housed **individually**.

## **Health & Veterinary Care**

Horned lizards are prone to stress and health issues in captivity, especially if their **diet and temperature** are not optimal.

### **Common Issues**

* Emaciation or weight loss from inadequate feeding
* Dehydration and impaction from improper substrate
* Metabolic bone disease (calcium or UVB deficiency)
* Parasites, particularly in wild-caught individuals
* Heat stress if basking zones are too hot or no escape is provided

### **Signs of Illness**

* Lethargy or hiding excessively
* Weakness or unresponsiveness
* Irregular or absent feces
* Swollen limbs or jaw
* Deformed or soft bones

Schedule an exam with an exotics veterinarian soon after acquiring and monitor weight and behavior closely.

## **Enrichment**

Horned lizards are not highly interactive but benefit from space to move and naturalistic décor.

### **Enrichment Ideas**

* Shifting basking rocks and hides
* Periodic introduction of new textures or small safe plants
* Placement of prey in shallow dishes or varied areas to encourage hunting behavior
* Visual barriers to help them feel secure

## **Facts & FAQs**

* Horned lizards are **insectivores with a strong preference for ants**
* They have the ability to **squirt blood from their eyes** when threatened (rare in captivity)
* Their flattened body and camouflage help them blend into arid landscapes
* Many species of horned lizards are **declining in the wild** due to habitat loss and pesticide use
* They require **precise, stable care** and are generally not suited for beginner reptile keepers

## **Supplies Checklist**

* 20+ gallon long tank with secure lid
* Basking bulb and high-output UVB fixture
* Digital thermometer and hygrometer
* Fine sand or sand/soil substrate
* Shallow food and water dishes
* Safe feeder insect supply (and source of ants if possible)
* Calcium and multivitamin supplements
* Hides and low basking structures
* Cleaning supplies and reptile-safe disinfectants
* Secure carrier for veterinary visits

*Yarmouth Veterinary Center*