



Leopard Geckos! What, Where, and How

What, Where, and How

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=eW21TawB5qc>

<https://nerdfighteria.info/v/eW21TawB5qc>

Jessi: Welcome back to Animal Wonders, I'm Jessi. Many non-domestic animals have found their way into the hearts and homes of humans in recent years. We as humans are often drawn to bright colors, intelligence, and adorable faces. But even though most people intend to give them amazing care, there are often terrible recommendations given for the animal's care. We can easily get caught up in the immediate intrigue of some of these amazing animals that we don't stop think about the natural history behind some of even the most common household pets. So today, we're gonna work on that, we're gonna do a What, Where, How on leopard geckos.

(Animal Wonders Intro)

What are leopard geckos, where do they come from, and how do we give them the best possible care in captivity? These little guys are hardy, flashy, and have become famous as household pets, which is why it's somewhat surprising that many people don't know more about leopard geckos.

They belong to the kingdom Animalia, phylum Chordata, and class Reptilia, meaning they're ectothermic, or their temperature is determined by their environment. Their order is Squamata, meaning that they are covered in overlapping scales. This group includes all lizards and snakes, and here we get into some more complicated taxonomy. As we learn more and more about the animals and the natural history of animals on our planet, scientists need to make revisions. Since we already have a fairly good system of classification, we're just making adjustments where necessary.

So now we need to differentiate between lizards and snakes. The suborder Lacertilia does just that, it takes all the lizards, while the suborder Serpentes takes all the snakes. But not all lizards are the same, and some are more closely related than others, so now we're going to go into infraorders so we can distinguish between tegus, iguanas, and geckos, and more!

Geckos are mostly defined by the vocalization that they can do. It's kind of a chirping noise, it sounds kind of like 'gecko', which is how they got their name. They use that to communicate with each other. There are seven families of geckos; there are over 1500 species. Most geckos have amazing pads on their toes that help them climb, and also many of them lack eyelids, so they use their tongue to lick their eyeballs clean. Our little friend, Freckles the leopard gecko, defies these rules.

Well, actually, that's why they made the family Eublepharidae, for geckos that break the rules. The 30 species among the six genera in the family Eublepharidae all lack the special adhesive toe pads, and they have movable eyelids that can blink. Leopard geckos belong to the genus *Eublepharis*, meaning true eyelid. The species name *macularius* means 'spot'.

So we've learned what a leopard gecko is, a very special lizard, now we need to learn where they come from. If you look at Freckles, you could guess that she doesn't come from the tropical rainforest that many geckos come from. Her adaptations have allowed her to live in harsher environments.

Leopard geckos can be found in the deserts of Asia, from Afghanistan to Pakistan, northwest India, and parts of Iran. These desert habitats I'm talking about are not sandy dunes, but hard rock and dirt with sparse vegetation. They spend most of the day hiding under that vegetation or in small burrows.

They are nocturnal, so at dusk, they wake up, they become active, and they start hunting their prey, which includes moths and ants, spiders, and other small invertebrates. Their body has adapted to these harsh environments, so they need to be alert, see and listen

well, and run fast to catch prey and avoid predators. They've lost those adhesive pads, and they've gained short, sharp nails. They also have gained eyelids that help protect their sensitive eyes from dirt and debris. They can also hear quite well which helps them locate prey, but also communicate with other geckos.

But these guys keep continuing to be awesome. Their color gives them camouflage, and they can voluntarily drop their tail, called caudal autotomy. Falls right off! There are tiny little fractures in the tailbone there that make it easier for them to break it off, and rapid vasoconstriction, or the closing up of the veins, allows minimal bloodloss. But they only get to do this when it's absolutely necessary, because their tail does something else really important.

Their tail can function as a place to store fat for later use. I like to call it their refrigerator. So when their predator comes by and wants to eat them, they can drop their tail, it can actually wiggle for up to 30 minutes after it's dropped, and the predator's all distracted by the tail, you know, they do lose their fat storage, but it's a pretty heavy tail so they can actually get away quicker and save their life, regenerate their tail, and start all over again.

We've now learned the leopard gecko's natural history, which is a really important thing to know if you're gonna try and provide these guys with a happy and healthy home in captivity. So let's move on to the how. How do we provide a great environment for a leopard gecko?

Start with a glass tank with a screen top. They need a screen top for ventilation, but the glass walls are gonna prevent them from climbing the walls and then falling off. A ten gallon tank is okay, a fifteen is better, a twenty gallon tank is the best. Place it away from the window, so it's avoiding direct sunlight or a chill in the winter.

The substrate is the first thing that you need to consider when giving them an environment. Now, this is the first place where a lot of people get terrible advice. Pet stores are going to push loose sandy material like calci-sand or repti-sand, because they're considered a 'desert animal', but we just learned about their natural history, and we know that they live in deserts, but their habitat is not loose sandy material. So offer them hard flooring with little to no loose sand. Things like tiles or slate or paper towels even, reptile carpet, or mats. We use one-third reptile carpet, and two-thirds hard rocky mat.

The next thing you need to provide is a water dish and several hiding places. The water dish needs to be shallow and the hiding places need to be able to fit a seven-inch gecko. You can give them plants, a hammock, a branch, more rocks, more hiding places, just don't clutter the area too much. You want to be able to let them walk around freely.

The next very important environmental factor is temperature. They need to be able to access a high range of 85-90 degrees Fahrenheit, and not dip below about 65. This can be achieved by an under-the-tank heater or a clamp-on heat lamp. This is the second instance where terrible advice can be given. Never, ever use a heat rock. That's an in-the-tank fake rock with a heater on the inside. These are very unreliable heat sources. They can get too hot, the leopard gecko will come and relax, fall asleep on it, and they'll burn their bellies to the rock. Very dangerous, never use them. For your under-tank heater or overhead heat lamp, use a thermometer with a probe so you can accurately test the temperature right where your gecko's going to be. At Animal Wonders, we have a temperature controlled room, so we don't need an additional source of heat. Since these guys aren't diurnal, or active during the day, they don't need a full spectrum UV light. A lot of leopard gecko owners run into the problem where their leopard gecko is not shedding off their toes properly. These guys shed



Leopard Geckos! What, Where, and How

What, Where, and How

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=eW21TawB5qc>

<https://nerdfighteria.info/v/eW21TawB5qc>

regularly, and they actually eat their skin off of them, but their toes are really hard to come off. If they're retaining skin or shed on their toes, it means they're not getting the right level of humidity. Put a little box or a Tupperware with a hole cut in it with some moss inside, and mist that down whenever you see your gecko getting dusky or about ready to shed.

And lastly, you need to provide a healthy and varied diet for your leopard gecko. Crickets can be great as long as they're gut-loaded, and you dust them down with calcium and multivitamins at least once a week. You can also offer them small cockroaches, they love them, and they're a great source of nutrients. Mealworms and waxworms can also be offered, sparingly though. The waxworms are really fatty, so, so just a few of those every once in a while. And the mealworms, you need to crush their mandibles so that they don't bite the insides of their mouth. Also, their exoskeleton can cause compaction if you feed too much of them.

Owners can also run into a lack of calcium to develop their bones properly, so to offer these guys a chance to regulate their own needs, offer them a tiny little dish of calcium powder, so that they can go and eat it if they feel like they need it.

When you want to handle your leopard gecko, approach them slowly. Never, ever try to pick them up by their tail. We already know what can happen there. Take your hand, and grab them around their body, just like that, and then set them on your hand, provide them a nice stable flat surface. These guys might try to climb, but they're not very good at it. They can fall, so don't give them a vertical surface, like let them climb up you and sitting on your shoulder. Keep them on your hand and arms. Don't keep these guys away from their home for too long, or they can become stressed. But once they get to know you, they can come out and spend time with you. These guys aren't social by nature, so companionship isn't needed, but females can cohabitate if they get along.

I hope that you've enjoyed learning about leopard geckos, what they are, where they came from, and how you can give them the best home possible, thanks, Freckles. If you would like to go on adventures with us every week, you can subscribe to our YouTube channel, AnimalWondersMontana, or you can find me on Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook. Thanks, guys.