

Roger's Aquatics & Pet Supplies: Fire Skinks

Lepidothyris fernandi (formerly *Riopa fernandi*) is a colourful skink species from West Africa. They typically reach an adult size of 12 – 14 inches, and are thought to have a lifespan of 10 – 20 years under proper care. Fire skinks can be shy, but when housed correctly can become quite active and are full of personality. This species is diurnal, meaning they are most active during the day.

Enclosure: Size, Substrate, and Accessories

Fire skinks should be housed in a minimum of a 20 gallon long (30" L by 12" W by 12" H). They do better when housed in a 40 gallon breeder (36" L by 18" W by 18" H) and will use every inch of that space.

At least 4 inches of substrate should be provided, as fire skinks enjoy burrowing. A substrate that allows for this should be chosen. Suitable substrates include Plantation Soil, Eco Earth, ReptiSoil. Other substrates are also available, or products can be mixed together to suit the fire skinks needs. The substrate should be kept moist, but not wet. A top layer of moss and leaf litter is beneficial, as it will help retain humidity and provide cover for the skink. It is important to note that there is a risk of impaction with any animal that is being housed on loose substrate. Typically, impaction only occurs with animals that are dehydrated, not receiving adequate lighting or diet, or in some other way are unhealthy, and it is much rarer than people think, but if you choose to keep your animal on loose substrate you should familiarize yourself with the signs of impaction and see what local vets deal with reptiles. Unless the enclosure is bioactive, the substrate should be changed out every 3 – 4 months.

Fire skinks inhabit forests, woodlands and areas that are densely vegetated. Care should be taken to mimic this environment. Provide logs, branches, and caves for the skink to hide in and explore. Plants should be added to create a more natural environment and provide extra coverage for the skink. Plastic and silk plants are both safe and natural looking. Live plants may also be used, but always research the safety of the plant first and how to introduce it to the terrarium.

Lighting and Heat

Provide fire skinks with a daytime basking temperature of 84 – 86 F (28.8 – 30 C), with a basking area of 92 – 96 F (33.3 – 35.5 C). This can easily be achieved using a daytime basking bulb. Wattage will vary based on household temperatures as well as enclosure size. The night time temperature should not go lower than 65 F (18.3 C). If needed, a ceramic heat emitter can be added at night time to maintain the temperature. A proper thermometer should always be used to measure the temperature. Too hot, and the animal could overheat. Too cold, and they won't grow properly or won't digest properly. Digital is preferred, since it is more accurate.

A 10.0 UVB bulb should be provided during the day. This type of lighting is essential in maintaining proper vitamin D3 levels, which allows them to properly absorb and metabolize calcium, regulates the immune system, and promotes proper organ development. Since these lights are aren't quite the same as the sun, providing a calcium with added D3 once in a while is beneficial. UVB lights should be replaced every 6 – 12 months.

Lighting should be on for no more than 12 hours per day.

Diet and Supplements

Fire skinks will accept a wide variety of prey. Crickets, mealworms, superworms, phoenix worms, and silkworms can all be fed as staple items. Waxworms, butterworms, and hornworms can be fed as treats on a once or twice a week basis. Being an opportunistic feeder, they will eat at almost every chance they get. A good feeding schedule is 5 – 10 crickets every two to three days, depending on the appetite of the skink. Some skinks may like to eat more frequently. Feeders should be dusted with calcium with D3 every second feeding, and a multivitamin every three days. All feeder insects should be gut loaded 1 – 24 hours before being fed.

Hydration and Humidity

The humidity should be maintained at a minimum of 40%. Spraying the tank 1 – 2 times daily, as well as keeping the substrate moist should be sufficient to maintain this. A proper hygrometer should always be used to measure the humidity levels. Digital is preferred, since it's more accurate. Using the hygrometer, you will be able to tell what steps are needed to maintain the correct humidity.

While the skinks may not always use it, a water dish should always be available. The water should be replaced every second day, and the dish should be bleached once a week to prevent the growth of bacteria.

Cohabitation

Males should never be housed together as they will fight. Females can sometimes be housed together, if a larger tank with more hiding spots is provided. Male/female groups should be avoided unless there is the intention to breed, and the means to raise and, if needed, keep all the babies. The male should still have his own tank to return to so that the females may have a break from the stress of breeding.

Sexing

Males are more stocky and longer than females, and can develop slight jowls. Females tend to be more slender in the head.

Checklist of Supplies

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| ✓ Enclosure | ✓ Insect keeper |
| ✓ Lid for enclosure | ✓ Insect diet |
| ✓ Substrate | ✓ Insect gut load |
| ✓ Heat lamp and bulb | ✓ Worm dish |
| ✓ UVB bulb and fixture | ✓ Water dish |
| ✓ Thermometer | ✓ Logs |
| ✓ Hygrometer | ✓ Branches |
| ✓ Calcium with D3 | ✓ Caves |
| ✓ Multivitamin | ✓ Plants |