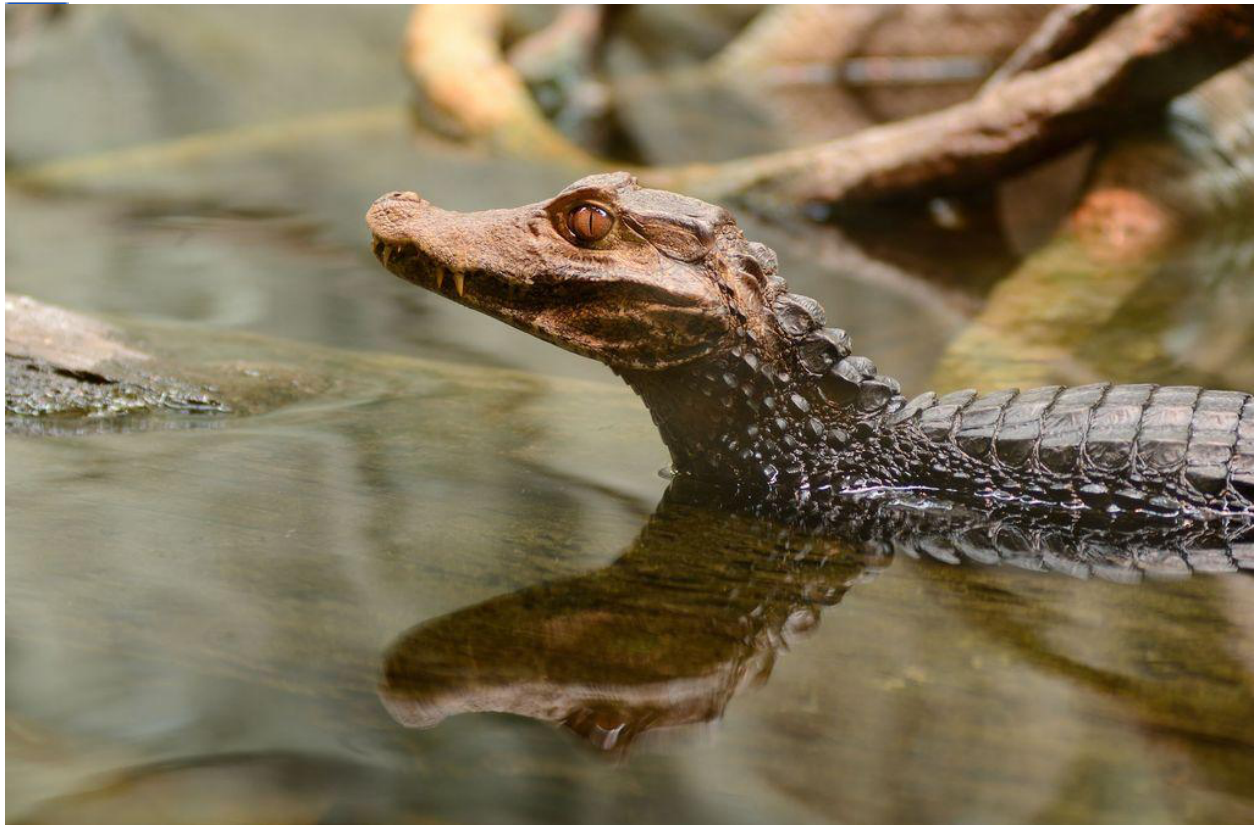


Cuvier's Dwarf Caiman care and habitat maintenance

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Cuvier's Dwarf Caiman (*Paleosuchus palpebrosus*.) Care and Maintenance

Difficulty: Expert

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The Cuvier's dwarf caiman is the smallest crocodylian in the world. Under optimal conditions, they can reach a maximum length of 5 feet from head to tail, with males generally larger than females.

Native to the northern parts of South America, they have an extensive range through the Orinoco and Amazon basins. They are semi-aquatic like most crocodylians and can be found in or near permanent bodies of water, such as ponds, rivers, and lakes. However, they are considered more terrestrial than most other crocodylians, performing a reasonable degree of land activity. Nocturnal by nature, they hide in burrows during the day and come out at night.

Crocodylians are some of the most awe-inspiring reptiles in the world, playing a vital role in their ecology as apex predators. Unfortunately, these animals are often victims of impulse buys, particularly when they're smaller and "cuter". More often than not, the buyer would forget the massive size that a lot of these fierce reptiles can get.

The Dude does not recommend crocodylians as pets, much less for beginners, as they can be pretty dangerous to work with. Suffice it to say, there are far better reptile companions that The Dude proudly offers, such as corn snakes, leopard geckos, bearded dragons, and so forth.

However, with the popularity of dwarf caimans on the rise even now, we wish to provide the best advice possible to set you up for success in husbandry for these unique reptiles.

What You Need for a Bioactive Cuvier's Dwarf Caiman Enclosure (recommendations on products based on enclosure floor plan)

- An indoor enclosure that has 16'L x 8'W of floor space
- An outdoor enclosure (climate permitting)
- A small to the large water-land tub (depending on the size of the caiman)
- 15' x 15' pond liner or larger
- Pond liner underlayment
- 34" Arcadia Desert 12% UVB T5 HO bulb x1 - 3
- 36" The Bio Dude Solar Grow T5 HO Single Bulb Light Strip x1 - 3
- BioDude Glow & Grow 22"LED x1-3
- Exo Terra Sun Glo Halogen Lamp 150watt, x2
- Arcadia Lamp Holder Pro, x2
- Plug-in lamp dimmer, x2
- Titanium Aquarium Heater System (for smaller enclosures and only in very cold states)
- Thermo Koj Pond Heater (for larger enclosures and only in very cold states)
- Protective heater cover
- Infrared thermometer
- Digital probe aquarium thermometer
- Extension cords as needed

- Pond Filter, rated for up to 1000+ gallons
- Pond Filter media (if not included with filter)
- Siphon
- Surge protector power strip
- Terra Firma, 230+ Bulk Cases
- Live plants (both aquatic and terrestrial)
- décor (rocks, wood, etc.)
- Mazuri® Crocodilian Diet- Small

Enclosure Size

Being the smallest crocodilian species, it is relatively easier to house dwarf caimans in your household than its larger cousins. Relatively, being the operative word, as they will still take up quite a bit of real estate. Being sedentary creatures by nature, it's easy to make the mistake of thinking they don't need much space. However, while they don't appear active initially, they will utilize all available space provided once nighttime hits.

Starting with a bigger enclosure from the get-go is highly recommended to allow room to grow, rather than going through many enclosures as your caiman grows. Young caimans can be housed in a smaller setup while their forever home is being built. We generally recommend water land tubs over glass aquariums, as they're more cost-effective and water land tubs are already made with semi-aquatic animals in mind. They also have lids available from medium to small tubs, though the large tubs will need a custom lid.

Not many commercially available enclosures are made with 5-foot caimans in mind, so a forever home will have to be custom-made. The enclosure should be at least 16' x 8' of floor space for one full-grown individual, with a 36" substrate dam to account for the water depth. When in doubt, bigger is always better! A PVC enclosure would be a great option since they can be waterproofed, are strong, lightweight, and offer good insulation. However, bear in mind that sealant will be required to prevent leaks. However, lining the enclosure with silicone is needed to prevent the wood from biodegrading and being chewed through by your clean-up crew.

Weather permitting, outdoor habitats are highly encouraged, especially if provided enough space to go above and beyond with the caiman's needs. Make sure the enclosure is secure and enclosed so that the caiman doesn't escape or get predated on by larger predators. If you live in an area that gets cold in the wintertime, be sure you have an indoor setup ready to go. It is generally recommended only to keep one caiman per enclosure. A pair is doable (preferably male and female), so long as there's extra floor space, and approximately the same size to prevent one from dominating over the other. If two males are kept together, fighting is likely to happen. In short, they are best kept by themselves.

Water Area

As a general rule for crocodylians, the water area needs to be deep enough for the animal to submerge fully. Ideally, the water area should be about 8'x10' of floor space, with a depth of 3+ feet for full-grown adults to allow the caiman to swim and float at its leisure, as well as a shallow area where it can rest and stay submerged.

For flexibility, a 15x15 Pond Liner or larger with underlayment should be considered. However, be mindful to line these with rocks, as the claws of the caiman could puncture the liner.

Land Area

Dwarf caimans are semi-aquatic, meaning they require not only a water area but also a land area as well. The land area should be at least 6' x 8' of floor space. As a more terrestrial crocodylian, more land than water is encouraged. We recommend a 65/35 water to land ratio. What's truly important is that the land area is large enough for the caiman to perform its land activities, such as walking, digging, and perhaps a bit of climbing.

For indoor or temporary enclosures, the Bio Dude Terra Firma substrate is perfect for the area, as caimans create burrows to spend the day resting, and the Terra Firma is great for retaining all burrows. Inlay some large pieces of flagstone or stone paver for the basking spot and large pieces of cork bark to create dens and as an additional basking area. How much substrate you need will ultimately depend on which enclosure type you choose to go with: more water than land or more land than water. Suffice it to say, the larger the land area, the more substrate you will need. Whichever the case, 230+ bulk cases of Firma are highly recommended for an indoor enclosure for an adult. We recommend you call customer care for a custom order of substrate.

Lighting & UVB

Being mainly nocturnal, it's easy to believe that caimans don't need UVB to thrive in their enclosure. Yet, there is a school of thought that all animals are exposed to at least a little bit of sunlight at some point in the day, and research has shown that caimans do better with UVB than without.

How much UVB you provide will depend on how far the land area is away from the lighting:

- Arcadia T5 6% D3 Forest for 10" - 12" away from the basking spot
- Arcadia T5 12% D3+ Desert for 12" - 18" away from the basking spot
- Arcadia T5 14% D3+ Dragon for 18 - 24" away from the basking spot.

A good daylight bulb is also a good idea to get the necessary night/day cycle that keeps animals stimulated. The Bio Dude Glow & Grow 22" LED is a great way to illuminate smaller enclosures. In addition, any plants you may decide to add to the enclosure will thrive with the spectrum of these lights.

Heating

When it comes to heating, caimans can be tricky, primarily since they hail from tropical environments, and their forever home will be pretty large. In addition, being cold-blooded animals, they need a thermal gradient to regulate their body temperature as needed.

For best results, your Cuvier's dwarf caiman will need the following temperatures:

- Air temperature: 78 - 84 degrees Fahrenheit
- Basking area: 88 - 95 degrees Fahrenheit
- Water temperature: 65 - 75 degrees Fahrenheit

You need to hook up all heaters to a thermostat to have the temperatures where you need them.

Heating on Land

Though dwarf caimans aren't big baskers as far as reptiles go, they partake in the activity, especially after a hearty meal. The best way to provide ambient heat is with 150w halogen flood heat bulbs and two Arcadia lamp holder pro fixtures. Hang the fixtures from the ceiling, so it is the same distance from the basking area as the UVB lamp. If the bulbs get a little too warm, you can plug the lamps into lamp dimmers and reduce the heat. If the bulbs are a little too cool, you will need higher-wattage bulbs. Keep track of your basking surface temperature is to use a temperature gun like the Etekcity 774.

Heating in Water (should typically only be used if the ambient temps drops water temp below 55-60)

For juvenile caiman enclosures with 300+ gallons of water, a 1200W Titanium Aquarium Heater System is an excellent option.

Due to the destructive nature of the caiman, a protective barrier for the heater is a definite must. Unfortunately, since most water heaters don't come with a protective barrier, one will have to be custom-made to protect the heater from getting destroyed by the caiman and to prevent the caiman from getting electrocuted from accidentally biting it.

For the caiman's forever home, you may need to consider getting a [pond heater](#) (not to be confused with a deicer) in order to keep such a large body of water warm.

Assuming there's good insulation, the ambient heat of the enclosure should also help with the water temperature. Adding a halogen bulb or perhaps even a mercury vapor bulb over the water area is a good way to heat the water since the concentrated heat will land on top of the water, creating a thermal gradient.

In short, you'll want to experiment with the water temp and the heat sources listed to get it right before you introduce your dwarf caiman in the enclosure.

Keep track of water temperature with a digital probe aquarium thermometer like the Zacro LCD Digital Aquarium Thermometer.

Water Maintenance

With caimans being very messy animals, having a good filter is vital for the water area. Since most filters are made with the intent of fish aquariums, you're going to want to provide at least twice the filtration with caimans. For smaller setups, canister filters are a great way to keep the water clean. For instance, for a juvenile caiman living in a large water land tub with 200 gallons of water, a Fluval FX6 High-Performance Aquarium Canister Filter will get the job done great, as it's rated for 400 gallons of water.

For an adult enclosure, where a pond area will be utilized, we firmly believe a pond filter is your best friend, as they are made for large bodies of water. Perhaps the best and easiest way to provide excellent water quality is to install a waterfall filter along with a pond skimmer, as you will get a combo of top-notch mechanical and biological filtration. Plus, it will be easy to maintain, and it can blend seamlessly into the enclosure. It's a win-win!

For this, you will need the following:

- Waterfall filter
- Pond skimmer
- Pond pump up to 1000 gph
- 1-inch diameter pond tubing

You may want to consider AquaScape 99765 DIY Ecosystem Backyard Pond Kit, 8 feet x 11 feet to have all you need for the water area: liner, filter, pump, skimmer, and all

In any case, bi-weekly water changes are still necessary to maintain overall health in the water area. In addition, a minimum of 25% of the water should be siphoned out to maintain water quality.

Decorating the Enclosure

The best part about building any enclosure is building it. Not only is it pleasing to our eyes, but it's also vital for the animal's enrichment, allowing them to express natural behaviors. Aside from swimming, walking, and basking, caimans also like to dig, hide in plants, and hunt fish.

River rock substrates for the water area, pieces of wood, flagstone, hideouts, and even (compatible) live fish can be a good way to decorate and enhance your enclosure's enrichment value.

Live plants will also add beauty and life to the bioactive setup, be it water or land. However, due to the caiman's weight and destructive nature, they need to be rather large and hardy plants, such as trees, shrubs, etc., that can handle the weight and thrashing of the caiman.

Food

Like all crocodylians, the Cuvier's dwarf caiman is a carnivore, meaning it eats other animals to survive. What they eat depends on the caiman's size:

Hatchlings to Yearlings

- Feed daily to every other day
- Diet: crickets, dubia, pinky to adult mice, guppies, hornworms, krill

Juveniles to Sub adults

- Feed 2 - 3x weekly
- Diet: adult mice, small to medium rats, quail, shrimp, insects, whole fish

Adults

- Feed 1 - 2x weekly
 - Diet: large rodents, poultry, whole fish, shrimp, meat chunks (supplemented with vitamin powder)

As caimans typically like to swallow their food whole, you want to offer prey items no larger than the space between their eyes. This is to avoid choking hazards and prevent esophageal tears from the spurs of insect legs.

Please avoid using goldfish as anything more than an occasional treat. These fish are high in copper and thiaminase, a killer of thiamine, resulting in major vitamin B deficiency if fed in excess.

For more options on feeding these carnivorous reptiles, please visit the [reptile food](#) section on ReptiFiles.

Supplements

To ensure that your caiman is getting all the vitamins and minerals they need, vitamin and calcium supplements are needed. Calcium is especially important for young and growing caimans who are still developing strong bones. However, take care that you don't use too many supplements, or health problems will follow. REPASHY CALCIUM PLUS makes for a great supplement of calcium and multivitamins simultaneously.

In addition, there is a formulated pellet diet, especially for crocodylians made by Mazuri®, available in two sizes. This is specially made to provide the necessary vitamins and nutrition content that crocodylians need to thrive. To some, it may be tempting to use this pelleted diet as their main staple. However, as with all other animals, variety is key! As such, we firmly believe that pelleted diets should only be a supplement and not a staple.

Handling tips

Suffice it to say, a caiman is not an animal you're going to handle very often, especially once it reaches its adult size. Being that they are skittish crocodilians, they will need time to acclimate to their new home and to figure out you're not going to it them.

Crocodilians are intelligent reptiles and can recognize vocal cues and feeding techniques. Use a specific call of your choosing, as well as a brightly colored ball at the end of a stick during feeding time. This will help the caiman know when it's feeding time as you approach the enclosure, rather than expecting food everything single time you approach. This will also make transport easier when it's time to move your caiman to its eventual forever home or perform routine checkups.

Once the caiman has gotten used to you and has learned the behavioral cues, it will become less resistant when it's time to handle it. But just because you've reached that stage, doesn't mean the animal trusts you and will still not hesitate to defend itself when it feels the need rises.

Support the whole body

- Use slow movements
- Avoid grabbing them from above, chasing them, or pulling them from a hiding place
- Use behavioral techniques whenever possible
- Reward them with a treat

Tong feeding is a great way to bond with your caiman!

Conclusion

So now that you know what all you need to take care of a dwarf caiman, do you still want one as a pet?

Meeting their needs will be no walk-in the park by any means, and it is quite an investment to meet all these requirements. However, if you are certain that this is the pet for you and you are willing to dedicate your time to all your caiman's needs, then it will all result in a rewarding and exciting experience to care for one of the world's most fascinating reptiles.

For best results, obtain **The Ultimate Guide to Crocodilians** in Captivity by Chris Dieter.

Additional sources

<http://crocodilian.com>

<https://hellogeckos.wordpress.com>

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