

The Differences Between Caring for Diurnal vs. Nocturnal Reptiles

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There are many considerations that go into deciding what type of reptile may be best for you. However, one factor that often gets ignored is when the reptile in question is most active. There are both diurnal (day-active) and nocturnal (night-active) reptiles: most turtles and tortoises are active during the day, but snakes and lizards may be active during night or day depending on species. Which one may be best for you depends primarily on your lifestyle.

Caring for Diurnal Reptiles

- Need to be fed during daytime, preferably in the morning
- Handling and enrichment activities should occur during day
- Generally hide at night to sleep
- UVB required
- 6500K lighting required
- Basking platform/branch required

When setting up an enclosure for a diurnal reptile, UVB and 6500K lamps are generally required to replicate some of the wavelengths produced by the sun, as well as the general brightness of daytime.

Diurnal reptiles generally openly bask in sunlight during the day, so overhead heating must be used to replicate the warmth of the sun, with a designated basking platform or branch underneath.

Popular diurnal reptiles:

- Bearded dragon
- Blue tongue skink
- Corn snake
- Gopher snake
- Green anole
- Hognose snake
- Mud turtle
- Panther chameleon
- Russian tortoise
- Veiled chameleon

Caring for Nocturnal Reptiles

- Need to be fed in evening or at night
- Handling and enrichment activities should occur in evening or at night
- Generally not visible during daytime
- UVB not required for survival
- 6500K lighting not required
- Warm hide required

When setting up an enclosure for a nocturnal reptile, UVB is optional, but still strongly recommended, as nocturnal reptiles are known to occasionally bask or partially expose themselves to sunlight as needed. A 6500K lamp is not needed unless the enclosure has live plants that need the light.

In addition, multiple hides must be provided, including a warm hide directly under the heat lamp. This allows the reptile to warm up and thermoregulate without needing to expose itself to potential “predators.” The primary heat source should still be a halogen heat lamp, but secondary heating with a thermostat-regulated heat mat may be necessary for nighttime.

A particular challenge with caring for nocturnal reptiles is providing enrichment activities for them and scheduling handling. Some activities/puzzles can be set up ahead of time inside the enclosure, but if you want to take your pet out of its enclosure for handling or exploring, this needs to happen at night. Much like humans, reptiles don’t appreciate being disturbed when they’re sleeping.

Popular nocturnal reptiles:

- African fat-tailed gecko
- Ball python
- Boa constrictor
- Crested gecko
- Gargoyle gecko
- Leopard gecko
- Mourning geckos
- Rosy boa
- Sand boa

What time of day a reptile is most active affects their feeding schedule, optimal handling times, and even the kind of equipment you will need to set up their enclosure appropriately. If you're looking for a reptile that kids can watch and interact with, then a diurnal species is likely to be your best bet. However, if you work night shifts, then a nocturnal species may be the better option for you.

Whether your reptile of choice is nocturnal or diurnal, don't neglect to replicate nature. Day should always be light and warm, and night should always be dark and relatively cool.