



Handle with care

Emperor scorpion

Species: Emperor scorpion
Scientific name: *Pandinus imperator*

Description

Emperor scorpions are normally a bluish black colour, but can also be different shades of brown and black. Newborn scorpions are soft and white. The pedipalps (the front leg-like appendages that end in claws which are used for catching prey, feeding and holding on to the other scorpion when mating) are very broad, slightly hairy and covered in bumps. Females grow to about 15cm in length; males are slightly shorter. These scorpions are generally not quick to sting, but can do so using the claw-like tip of their short, segmented tail (which is really a narrow extension of their abdomen), with humans reacting to the venom in a variety of ways ranging from no reaction at all, to that of a severe bee sting.

Emperor scorpions may survive for 12 years or longer in captivity.

Life in the wild

Emperor scorpions are native to the rainforests and wet savannah of West Africa, from Mauritania to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Like other scorpions, they are nocturnal and tend to be secretive spending the day in shallow burrows they have dug themselves. At night they hunt for prey – mostly other invertebrates, but sometimes they take small snakes and lizards.

Source of animals

The emperor scorpion is the most common scorpion in the pet trade. Most scorpions in the UK pet trade are likely to be either ratched (term used to describe wild-caught animals taken into captivity to breed with the resulting offspring bred or exported) from scorpion farms in Benin and Togo or wild-caught.

Prior knowledge and preparation

Before acquiring a scorpion, it is crucial that any potential keeper finds out about the animal – including how to provide for the animal's needs when kept in captivity and how long it lives. Only then can the keeper make an informed decision about whether s/he can provide the specialist care and captive environment required, and has the facilities, time, financial means and long-term commitment to maintain a good standard of care. The keeper can then acquire suitable accommodation, food and the necessary accessories, and prepare the enclosure to ensure the captive environment is stable before taking the animal home. This also gives the novice keeper time to locate and to talk to relevant experienced keepers that keep these species in captivity in the UK. Scorpions are unsuitable for anyone who wants an active pet that they can handle.

Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Holiday cover may be difficult and expensive to arrange, but your scorpion will need to be looked after properly every day for the time that you are away by someone who understands its needs.

Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

A healthy scorpion will become very active after being disturbed. If they are too cold they will not eat, but if overheated they can become very active, even appearing to sting themselves, and rolling on their backs in what looks like distress. These animals moult at a varying frequency depending on the animal's growth rate, with young animals moulting almost monthly and decreasing to once or twice a year for adults.

Why are emperor scorpions vulnerable in captivity?

Scorpions are completely dependent upon their keepers for the correct accommodation, heating, humidity, lighting and food, all of which must reflect as closely as possible, their wild habitat. Without correct care they will eventually die. Scorpions are not suitable pets for children or anyone who likes a pet they can frequently handle.

Health issues to find out about

- Dehydration.
- Over-heating.
- Over-feeding.
- Not feeding when too cold.
- Injuries from other scorpions.
- Injuries if dropped or if escape and then trodden on.

Handling/transporting the animal home

Scorpions should only be handled when absolutely necessary and then very briefly to transfer the animal from one surface straight onto another. They should be grasped just below the sting – never near the base of the tail or by the legs – using a pair of padded forceps. Pregnant females and those with young are very aggressive and should not be handled or disturbed at all. Young scorpions should never be removed from a mother's back.

The best way to move a scorpion is to gently herd it into a plastic container which you can close once it is inside. Scorpions can then be transported in ventilated plastic containers padded with shredded paper, sphagnum moss or a moss substitute.

Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

Emperor scorpions can be housed alone or in groups providing the terrarium is big enough and that hiding places for each scorpion can be provided. The colony should be established at the same time, as the introduction of additional scorpions can lead to the introduced animals being killed. Fighting or cannibalism may still occur however, so the scorpion group needs to be watched carefully. If male and female scorpions are kept together then they may breed, with a smooth pebble providing a suitable site to allow the fertilisation of the female. If sufficient food is not provided there is a risk of the young being eaten by the other scorpions. However, even if the gravid female is temporarily removed from the colony, the female may be attacked when returned.

A single scorpion will need an enclosure (terrarium) measuring 60cm long x 30cm wide x 30cm high. The terrarium should be made of glass or plastic with good ventilation and a secure, lockable lid. The enclosure should be placed away from direct sunlight, radiators and draughts. Scorpions will quickly overheat and die. The enclosure should open at the top rather than at the side where a scorpion could quickly escape. Half of the top of the terrarium should be screened with a very fine fiberglass but tough gauze to allow good ventilation but to still help to maintain the elevated humidity.

The enclosure floor should be covered in a 5–8cm deep layer of vermiculite or chemical-free potting compost. This should be covered with a thick layer of orchid bark or small bark chippings. The total depth should be at least twice the length of the scorpion and the deepest area should be in the coolest part of the terrarium. To provide the deep substrate layer suitable for keeping larger scorpions, the depth of the terrarium will therefore need to be increased to accommodate a sufficient depth of substrate, whilst retaining at least 15cm separation between the top surface of the substrate and the terrarium's lid. Scorpions would normally spend a lot of time hidden away in the wild, so a low shelter of stone or wood should also be supplied for each animal.

The enclosure should provide a range of temperature zones from 25–30°C and a humidity of 70–85 per cent. Special lighting for the terrarium is not needed, but one end of the enclosure should be made warmer than the other by putting a suitable heat pad or heating strips under just one-third of the cage. Locating the water bowl in the cooler end of the terrarium will help to keep the humidity at the right level although additional misting is necessary each day or on alternate days to keep the substrate damp but not saturated.

An adult emperor scorpion should be fed on live insects like crickets, grasshoppers, mealworms and caterpillars. Because scorpions are nocturnal, the food should be given at night. The size of the insects offered should also reflect the size of the scorpion. A large scorpion will eat about two to three adult crickets a week. Scorpions drink a lot of water, so the provision of a shallow dish of clean water is essential, with the rest of their fluid coming from fresh prey.

Any remains of uneaten food should be removed on a regular basis, with the terrarium thoroughly cleaned once or twice a year, whilst the occupant is temporarily removed. A ventilated plastic container padded with shredded paper (that is also used for transportation) will provide a suitable refuge until the cleaning has been completed.

THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.

If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.