

Sugar Glider

Petaurus breviceps



The Sugar Glider *Petaurus breviceps* has seven sub species. Three occurring in Australia and the other four in New Guinea. The sub species occurring in Australia are - *P.b. ariel*, Northern Territory extending into Western Australia. *P.b. longicaudatus*, Queensland and *P.b breviceps*, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania (introduced in 1830's)

Description

Sugar Gliders are bluey grey in colour with a dark dorsal stripe. Cream to grey underside/belly, with a grey and black tail sometimes with a white tip.

Head and Body length 16-21cm, tail 16.5-21cm. Weight, males 115-160g (140g) and females 95-135g (115g). In the wild their life expectancy is 4-6 years. In captivity 5-8, however they have been know up to 10 years, the oldest know animal lived to 14 years. Sugar Gliders are a vocal species with a vocalisation range from

barking, shrilled yapping and a defiant gurgling chatter (usually heard when disturbing them while in their nest box).

House requirements

When housing any species, the larger the enclosure the better. Current DSE recommended enclosure requirements are 5sq meters for 2 animals and 3m high. Increased floor area of 1sq meter per extra animal. For the construction of a Sugar Glider aviary steel tube would be the best material. Wood exposed to the Glider will be chewed and treated timber should always be avoided. The wire I use on most aviaries is 12mm x 12mm x 1.4mm thick, weld mesh.

Furnishing the aviary depends on the space you have, securing branches to the wire or planting them in the ground straight up and down to mimic tree trunks is a good start. The larger the gaps between branches will encourage gliding. Also consider a network of climbing branches suspended from the top of the aviary.

Think about where you place food, stainless steel food bowls hooked onto the wire can be moved around the cage, which will increase your Gliders activity and stimulate them at the same time.

Nest boxes should be provided as an alternative to a hollow log, simply because they are usually easier to access, to clean and replace if necessary. Nest boxes can be lined with fresh wood shavings or a similar bedding material. The more nest boxes that can be provided the better, two would be fine for a pair or a trio of Sugar Gliders.

Sugar Gliders will make their own nest within the box. I have observed my male *P.b.breviceps* running very quickly and somewhat erratically up and down a freshly place 3m *eucalyptus lehmannii* branch. He would stop hold a leaf in his feet, sniff the length off the leaf, if chosen he would break it off, put it in his tail and then continue. This behaviour occurred for a good 20 minutes before he disappeared into the nest box with a tail full of leaves. The nest box size is 200mm x 200mm x 450mm high. Entrance hole should be 40-50mm in diameter.

Housing Sugar Gliders with terrestrial species such as Brushtailed bettongs has been done successfully, this is also dependant on the size of the enclosure. (Bettongs require 20sqm for 2 animals).



Diet

Their diet in the wild consists of exudates, invertebrates, nectar, pollen and fruit. In captivity it is not difficult to provided an appropriate diet for this species. Below is the diet used by Healesville Sanctuary.

Daily per (animal)

6g fruit chopped
5g corn chopped
2g sprouted seed
1g fly pupae
2 Mealworms
1tsp Nectar mix

Dog/Chow Eukanuba Pet food kibble

Supplement

Pollen granules– once per week
3 Sultanas 3-4 times per week
1g pet health food once per week
(Ecopet one small cube)
Insects 3-4 times per week

Nectar Mix

900ml Warm water
900ml Honey
6 shelled hard-boiled eggs
150g high Protein Baby cereal
6tsp Sustagen

Method

Stir together water and honey until dissolved.

Make eggs mushy.

Add all ingredients together blend until smooth.

Can be stored for up to two weeks

Fresh water should be available at all times. Acacia, eucalypts and other blossoms should be supplied. Fresh cuttings should be given every two or three days. *Tip: Use a long plastic container wired to the aviary to hold water and put cuttings in.*



Another nectar mix that is quite easy is 2 level tbs Sustagen. 1/4 cup farex. 1/4 cup level raw sugar. 1 boiled egg (shelled). Water to mix. Put all ingredients into a kitchen blender and blend until a smooth consistency.

Other vegetables can be added to the diet, ie broccoli, cauliflower, carrot, it will depend what each individual animals likes. There are also some commercial supplements that can be used in a Sugar Gliders diet.

Pictured Wombaroo Insectivore Rearing Mix

Wombaroo High Protein Supplement

Vetafarm Blossom Nectar



Sugar gliders do not feed primarily on nectar, it is a supplement. When feeding as mentioned before move food bowls around the cage for increased exercise.

Even try spreading the food around in small amounts for the animals to find themselves. A light could be set up inside or next to the enclosure to attract insects for your Glider to catch for themselves. Exercise and a correct diet will prevent Sugar Gliders becoming obese. Obesity can lead to health issues. Cages should be checked daily to remove uneaten food, and refresh water bowls.

Disease

Nutritional osteodystrophy - know as hind limb paralysis can be common in captive sugar gliders. It seems to be cause by a calcium deficient diet. Adding calcium to the diet can be done by calcium dusting insects or gut loading insects with a high calcium diet.

Ectoparasites - ticks and fleas, signs can be the animal grooming excessively. Routine examination of the fur may alert you to this early. Good hygiene always is a preventative to any disease. If possible quarantine new animals for a period before introducing them to individual or your colony.

Endoparasites - do not normally affect gliders with good husbandry practices in place. Veterinary advice should be sought for diagnosis and treatment of intestinal worms.

Toxoplasmosis - *Toxoplasma gondii*, is a protozoan parasite it needs to be ingested via cat faeces. Prevent animals having access to cats and cat faecal material. Keep cats from accessing food storage areas and equipment areas (ie food bowls).

Good husbandry and hygiene practises are very important to prevent all possible causes of disease.

Breeding/ introductions

Sugar Gliders use scent to maintain group structure. Careful observation will alert you to possible aggression in animals and changes in the social structure. Sexing is quiet easy with males having obvious testes also males have scent gland in middle of their forehead which develops with age.



Sugar Gliders are polygamous in the wild.

In captivity keep one adult male to a colony only. A pair of animals is a good introduction to keeping this species. Trios can be kept successfully, both females may not breed as it has been found there can be a sexually dominate female and this female may be the only one to breed. Sugar Gliders breed well in captivity and breed at least once per year.

Birth season is April-November with a litter size of 1-2. The oestrus cycle is 29 days. Gestation is 16 days, this species has no post partum oestrus and no genetic diapause occurs.

The young will exit the pouch at 70-74 days. They wean around 110-120 days. Males become sexually mature at 8-15 months and females at 12 months.

New groups are best made with young animals, recently weaned or under one year old. Ideally when obtaining animals from different places they should be introduced into a new enclosure at the same time, to avoid fighting over already established territories.

Introducing an individual to an individual of the opposite sex will usually go well, without incident. Introductions of one animal into an already established group should be avoided. If necessary to do this a new enclosure should be set up with no scent of other Sugar Gliders and new nest boxes provided. Always be observant while doing this kind of introduction until a group structure develops.



Sugar Gliders are a relatively easy species and can be rewarding for those looking to keep their first marsupials, or for the already experienced keeper.

They are a species that when kept with good husbandry and hygiene practices in place are relatively disease and problem free. Once established in their enclosure with a bit of work from you, they

will become friendly, able to be hand fed and pat able. For viewing animals at night I have found low voltage garden lighting (timed to be on for an hour or so at dusk) around and in my aviaries gives me the opportunity to observe them going about their business, without being a distraction for them.