THE HARDY EUROPEAN REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS IN CAPTIVITY (Part 19)

by Andrew Allen

An immense variety of closely related small lacertids inhabit the South of Europe. Most of them require fairly similar care.

40. The Ruin Lizard (*Lacerta sicula sicula*)

Description.—This is the largest and most colourful of the Wall lizard group. It grows to 25 cms. in length, and has a long tail. Dorsally it is bluish-green with black patches (often with a blue centre) forming regular or irregular bands. The belly is a subdued cream, yellow or green.

Distribution.—The type is very abundant in Southern Italy, the Lipari islands, and parts of Sicily. It favours dry, rocky country and is common upon old walls.

Breeding Habits.—Up to ten eggs at a time may be laid in shallow holes in the ground, usually during May or June.

There are a host of sub-species, about twenty in all. The only one commonly to be seen in this country is *Lacerta sicula campestris*. It is a glorious grass-green, with a brown band down the back, usually spotted with dark patches. Females may have a deep blue patch on the shoulder. It comes from Northern Italy, Northern Yugoslavia, Monte Cristo, Elba and Corsica.

Related lacertids are:

Lacerta wagleriana—from Sicily, with uniform green back and brown flanks.

L. lilfordi—from the Balearics; sometimes imported into this country.

L. bedriagae—from Corsica and Sardinia, an exclusively montane form.

L. dugesii—from Madeira and the Canary Islands.

L. oxycephala—from Dalmatia, known as the Sharp-headed lizard. It is dark blue-grey dorsally, and a rather lighter shade below.

L. heiroglyphica, L. praticola, L. horvathi, L. mosorensis, L. graeca—from Sporades and Rhodes.

L. peloponnesiaca—an attractive and statuesque lizard from montane parts of the Peloponnesus.

L. taurica—a very similar lizard from Russia, Rumania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Albania, Yugoslavia and Greece.

L. erhardii—from Greece, Albania and the Aegean Islands; exists as numerous sub-species.

L. melisellensis fiumana—from Albania, Yugoslavia and its islands. The Rock lizard and its related sub-species are sometimes imported into this country. It comes from rocky, montane areas, and is characterised by a short head and a brown or copper-red dorsal coloration.

L. saxicola—from South-East Europe, is another lizard infrequently to be seen on dealers' lists.

L. bocagei—from the Iberian Peninsula, is a Spanish equivalent of the Wall lizard. It is green, olive or brown dorsally, with two white lines down each side of the body. The stripes are bounded by rows of black patches, which sometimes merge into bands. There are numerous sub-species.

L. hispanica—from the Southern coast of Spain, is a very small lizard with a pointed head, and grey or green coloration. It is not very abundant.

L. monticola—from mountainous parts of Spain and Portugal, is very similar to the "true" Wall lizard, but has a flatter body and more pointed head. The belly of the male is bright green, that of the female yellow. There are several sub-species.

41. The Wall Lizard (*Lacerta muralis muralis*)

Description.—Maximum length is about 20 cms., males usually being longer than females. The body is slender, and the tail very long. Dorsal coloration may be several shades of brown or grey, marked by small black spots in the male and rows of patches in the female. The belly is cream or yellow, sometimes with black and blue spots at its outer margin. In general coloration is rather more drab than in other Wall and Ruin lizards.

Distribution.—This is the ubiquitous and familiar Wall lizard of much of Central Europe, the type being

found in Pyrenees, France, Apennines, Belgium, Holland, Southern Germany, the Alpine countries, parts of the Balkans and Asia Minor. The major sub-species is *L.m. bruggemanni*, which is indigenous to North-West Italy, and now occurs also in the Danube valley near Passau. It is greener in coloration than the type. Numerous other sub-species come from Calabria, Corsica and Sardinia, many small Adriatic islands, Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece. Dry sunny habitats are favoured, including rocky slopes, vineyards, meadows and old walls.

Breeding Habits.—As for *L. sicula.*

Care in Captivity.—The following remarks apply in varying measure to all the Wall and Ruin lizards described above. Some of the most Southern species or sub-species may be less hardy than *L. muralis*, but otherwise their requirements are similar.

These animals do fairly well indoors, provided that they are given a very spacious vivarium with much opportunity for climbing. There should be a small water bowl, some sun-drenched stones or tiles, extra heat and light, and a goodly number of hiding places. It is important that the vivarium be thoroughly escape-proof. Wall lizards are small, and fast, and can climb practically anything. They will soon wriggle through a crack, or race up the arm that feeds them. One of my first pair of Wall lizards escaped three times from an apparently impregnable vivarium. The third time it got clear out of the house as well, and spent the next couple of years laughing at me from the safety of a rockery in the garden. Don't take any chances; all these lizards are like living quicksilver.

Most Wall and Ruin lizards are hardy enough to be housed in an outdoor reptiliary. But again this must be perfectly designed and constructed. The boundary walls must be high (about three feet) and smooth. The overhang must be wide and flawless, with a minimum of joints. No tall vegetation should be permitted to grow near the walls. Take all these precautions, and I would still be prepared to place a small bet on the lizards getting out at some time. One danger period is the feeding session, when lizards are climbing all over you, exploring your pockets, sunning on your shoulders or the top of your head. It is easy to forget just one, perhaps the one that has gone to sleep inside your shirt, and walk out with it. So be warned. However, if all due precautions are taken, the inhabitants should stay put and do very well indeed. A sunny, lightly planted reptiliary with deep hibernacula is ideal for these species.

Excellent also is a greenhouse, which must be well ventilated and dry. All cracks and potential egress routes must be rigorously sought out and blocked. A greenhouse provides an admirable climate for the semi-hardy Southern species, and gives much more vertical climbing space than either indoor vivarium or reptiliary. One good idea is to train variegated ivies up the back wall of the greenhouse, thus providing a wealth of opportunities for acrobatics. Alternatively, it would be possible to construct a stone wall along the rear of the greenhouse. With cracks and creepers this could be designed to mimic a crumbling Italian farm-house wall or similar. Especially suitable for such a purpose would be a lean-to greenhouse, where the appropriate wall would be ready and waiting. The opportunities for one of artistic bent are almost endless, and the end result could be of great aesthetic quality.

All are very easily fed, accepting a whole range of small invertebrates. As with most lizards, spiders are number one in popularity, closely followed by meal-worms. House flies and bluebottles are taken eagerly and athletically. They are best raised from maggots rather than caught as adults, to avoid contamination from insecticides used by well-meaning neighbours. Raw meat may be offered if all other fare is totally unavailable. In company with the majority of lacertids these lizards have a "sweet-tooth," and will relish a taste of demerara sugar or honey. This should be reserved solely for an occasional treat, and not be placed on the menu too often. Ripe soft fruit of many kinds will also help to add variety, and can be most beneficial to the health of these lizards.

These are good community animals, and can be associated with a pleasantly wide range of companions. Smaller Reptiles and Amphibians will never be molested, except when very young indeed. In consequence Wall lizards can be housed with practically any of the moderate-sized frogs, toads, newts and lizards, assuming, of course, that the appropriate different habitats are provided.

Despite their marvellous agility, they are potential prey for a number of larger predators. Green, Eyed and Schreibers lizards are not to be trusted in their company, and this applies to all the snakes as well. In addition, I have my suspicions of Marsh and Edible frogs, Clawed toads, and of big mama Common toads. It could be argued that in nature Wall lizards and some of these creatures co-exist perfectly happily. This is quite true, and I have often seen Green and Ruin lizards sunning together or Wall lizards and Edible frogs beside the same pool. Unfortunately, this constitutes no guide to composing a harmonious balanced community. The essence of a vivarium is that it is extremely cramped. There just is not the space for these lizards to escape from their foes, especially over a period of time. One other point should be remembered; there will always be intense territorial competition between males of the same species. In the wild the losers can retire to lick their wounds, in the vivarium they are confined in the company of their successful rivals. Thus there should only be one or two males per large outdoor vivarium, though seven or eight females can be housed in the same area with only minor bickering.

Any of the lizards described will fascinate through their varied, sometimes spectacular, colours and their extreme agility and pleasing activity. Most are easy to keep and tame fairly rapidly; some are quite reasonable in price. The more familiar species can be recommended safely to the moderately experienced amateur. The expert will find great interest in some of the more obscure, less hardy examples of the great group of "Wall lizards."

The final article in this series will deal with our own Slow-worm, and the Glass snake or Scheltopusik, largest lizard in Europe.

A REEF IN OUR HOME

by

Douglas Rose (B.M.A.A. member)

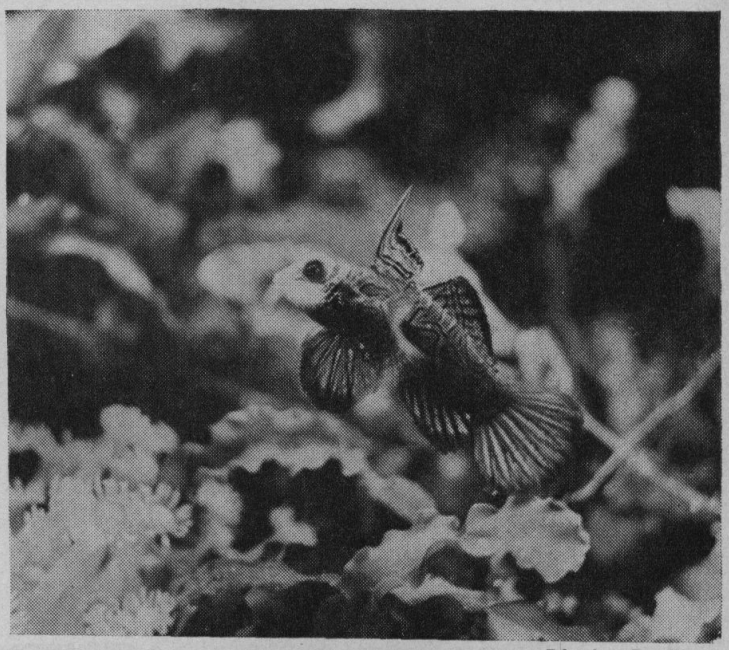

Photo. D. Rose

Mandarin Fish

ABOUT SIX months ago my father and I decided that a go at marines would be fun. We had seen a number of marine tanks around and they were, in our opinion, startling. It would be unfair to compare them with their freshwater counterparts as it would be like comparing an aeroplane with a car.

We finally decided to go in for marines after we had read the following books: "Tropical Marine Aquaria," by R. A. Risely; "The Salt Water Aquarium in the Home," by Straughn; and "Tropical Marine Aquaria," by Graham F. Cox. We also consulted three other paperbacks: (1) "The Marine Aquarium for the Home Aquarist," by Robert F. O'Connell; (2) "Enjoy a Saltwater Aquarium" (the Pet Libary); and finally, "Saltwater Fishes in Colour," by Dr. Herbert R. Axelrod. We had visited certain well-known marine dealers in Middlesex, Edgware and Guildford. They had some wonderful exhibits which boosted our desire to try this side of the hobby further.

After a great deal of thought we decided that it would be far more interesting and rewarding to set up the tank ourselves—unlike our discus tank. ("Prolific Pompadours," September, 1973).

The main problem was to decide what system to use. People have had great success with the natural, semi-natural and clinical systems. They all work; but of course some people prefer one system to another. At first we decided to use the natural system; but after using this for a couple of weeks our tank became rather dirty and we at once fitted up an Eheim power filter. We were told to do this by a very reputable dealer in Guildford. We have never regretted doing this and we are indebted to him for this advice.

Even though I said that we at first used the natural system, I must admit that our only extra device was an ozoniser. Our system thus consists of aeration, power filtration through charcoal/carbon and wool, and ozone (weak). So much for the type of system we use. We decided that a 48 in. × 15 in. × 24 in.(high) all-glass tank would be ideal. Next we obtained two 150w. combined heater and thermostats which could be adjusted under water. We bought an excellent make of salt called "New Tropic Marin" and also obtained a packet of Hilena Integral (an excellent plant fertiliser). We then bought a few bags of crushed coral sand—enough to cover the base of the tank to a depth of about half an inch. We bought two 3-foot 30w. Kolor-rite fluorescent tubes. The colour of the tubes was chosen after very careful consideration of the light spectrum of the various types available and it was considered that Kolor-rite was the nearest the light spectrum of the various types available and approach to pure daylight. We also put light blue photographic background paper on the tank to provide