



# The wall lizard

*(Lacerta muralis)*



by H. G. B. Gilpin

**T**HESE lizards are widely distributed amongst the warmer European countries, islands in the Mediterranean and Asia Minor and occur in a great number of geographical varieties. They are commonly imported into this country and their small size, slender shapes and lively habits make them ideal inhabitants of a vivarium. They have the further recommendation of being inexpensive to buy.

The overall length of the males is about seven and a half inches and that of the females six and a half inches. The somewhat elongated head surmounts a slightly flattened body which continues into a gracefully tapering, finely pointed tail, approximately twice the length of the body.

The upper parts of the body vary in colour from grey to brown, handsomely reticulated with black in the males. The female is striped with lines of black patches along the back and has a brown band bordered with paler stripes along the sides. The under parts are white, yellow or sometimes brick red, occasionally brightened with blue spots along the outer row of abdominal scales.

These animals, being diurnal, are particularly suited to vivarium life as, although they retire occasionally to some hidden retreat, most of the day they are constantly in view. An added advantage is the rapidity with which they settle down. Most of those I have kept have disliked being actually handled and have been reluctant to take food from the fingers but otherwise they have become extremely tame and shown no signs of alarm when they, or their quarters, have received attention.

It is perfectly safe to confine Wall Lizards with other lizards of the same size. They ignore those of other species and although a social hierarchy develops when

Wall Lizards are kept together in a group, I have never known any actual damage to result from their occasional sparring matches which rarely amount to anything more than expressions of mutual defiance.

I have frequently seen it stated that these European lizards will live comfortably in this country at room temperature but, as with Geckos, I have never cared to expose them to the rigours of the English winter, even when they are kept indoors. They will survive quite satisfactorily when given the comparative freedom of an unheated greenhouse providing it contains a bank of soil of such depth as to allow them to bury themselves safely below danger level and so hibernate throughout the colder months. In the house where no such facilities are available they are all the better for a little extra heat. That afforded by the installation of a 25 watt electric light bulb in their quarters is entirely adequate and the obvious enjoyment of the lizards as they bask in its warmth more than justifies its presence.

They are not troublesome to feed and will take winged insects up to and including the blowfly in size. It is true these insects are not always available but during most months of the year maggots can be obtained from shops supplying anglers' requisites or from firms catering for aviculturists requiring regular deliveries of bird foods. Some of the maggots will be eaten directly by the Wall Lizards but most will pupate and very soon develop into the adult flies. With a little care it is possible to stagger the hatchings so that a fairly constant sequence of the insects can be maintained. A single hatching will content the lizards for several days.

Wall Lizards, like most animals, do best on a varied diet and this can be achieved by ringing the changes with newly hatched locusts—Wall Lizards cannot cope with locusts much more than a week old—woodlice, young stick insects, crane flies when in season, and spiders. The latter are great favourites with my Wall Lizards and appear to be particularly beneficial. I have been told that Wall Lizards will eat small earthworms. These creatures cannot long tolerate the warm, dry conditions of the vivarium and if not eaten immediately would soon shrivel and become a nuisance. Consequently I have no personal experience of their value as an article of diet for this species of lizard. Mealworms, especially the small ones, are an unfailing standby and can always be used to fill a gap in the feeding programme.

Unless hungry, Wall Lizards show the utmost indifference to the presence of insects and it is not uncommon to see one of the lizards draped across a rock with a trio of young locusts perched on its back, utterly oblivious of the insecurity of their prospects. When a Wall Lizard is hungry, however, its behaviour undergoes an abrupt change. On sighting an insect it remains poised, immovable as a stone statue, for some seconds and then, suddenly galvanised into action, leaps towards its prey and seizes it in its jaws.

Wall Lizards require water and will drink from a pot. This should be small and so placed as to prevent the lizards from sliding through it, which they will do if permitted, during one of their not infrequent hurried excursions around their quarters. The water in itself would do them little, if any harm, but sand sticks all too readily to their

wet skins. This, apart from any possible ill effects it might cause, is unsightly and best avoided.

Although active, the small size of these lizards enables one to keep them satisfactorily in a comparatively small vivarium. One two feet by eight inches by eight inches is quite adequate and if suitably furnished will supply them with all the exercise they need.

In the wild these lizards inhabit dry, rocky country and are also frequently found in sparse woodland where very little water is available. They occur on walls, old buildings and ruins and I have seen them scampering over the thatch hovels of the Spanish peasants where no doubt an abundance of insects was to be found. This type of terrain can be simulated in a vivarium by covering the bottom with an inch or so of dry sand and building a background of large stones. At least one of these should have a flat surface facing the electric light bulb as the lizards will enjoy sprawling across its surface and basking in the heat. Sunken pots containing small cacti improve the appearance of the vivarium and I have never known them, in spite of their armour of spines, to affect the lizards adversely.

Wall Lizards are fond of climbing and a small gnarled branch with several short outgrowths, laid slantwise across the vivarium will enable them to indulge their proclivities in this direction thereby benefiting themselves and adding to the interest of anyone watching them.

Beginning in May or June the females start to lay their eggs, from two to eight to a clutch. A second or even third clutch may be produced before the end of the summer, each clutch being buried in the ground in holes dug by the female.



## Precious as gold

The Siamese Fighter is a joy to behold.  
He is fancy, fearless and fantastically bold.  
He comes from Siam and places like that;  
And is ready to fight at the drop of a hat.

In attracting attention he never fails;  
He just opens his fins like billowing sails.  
His colours include the yellows and blues;  
And reds and greens of various hues.

He's not very big and not very little;  
He builds his home from bubbles and spittle.  
When courting a female he's very aggressive;  
And when he's got fry, very possessive.

In a book index to find the fish I prefer,  
To the name "Betta Splendens" you'll have to refer.  
He'll bring to his owner pleasures untold;  
And to the person who owns him he's precious as gold!

A. BEASLEY