

## The Caiman Challenge

The spectacled caiman is a fascinating crocodilian that requires a major commitment.

By Bam Rubenstein

The spectacled caiman (*Caiman crocodilus*) is the caiman species most often found in captivity. This is because it used to be imported to the U.S. in huge numbers, and although the subject of this article is the spectacled caiman, the care tips provided can be applied to other caiman species, including the Cuvier's dwarf (*Paleosuchus palpebrosus*) and Yacare (*C. yacare*) caiman.

Have you ever considered getting a caiman? As you may know, they get quite large. Do not acquire a spectacled caiman while thinking, "I'll just keep it until it gets too big to handle." If that's your attitude, get yourself a hamster instead. Also, as caiman grow, their temperament usually gets worse. They are often considered the third-nastiest of the crocodilians, behind the saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) and the Nile crocodile (*C. niloticus*). Considering that a male spectacled caiman grows to 6 feet, and the Nile and the salty can get as big as 12 or 15 feet or more, this makes the spectacled caiman one potentially nasty reptile.

There is 250 million years of killer survival instinct inside a spectacled caiman, and it cannot be tamed. You might encounter one that is less aggressive than normal, and perhaps even passive. This is rare, however, and even if you believe a caiman is not aggressive, never let your guard down around one. When a caiman bites you, it will hurt, and it's not usually a matter of "if" it will bite you -- if you spend enough time around a caiman, it will most likely bite you, or at least try to.

Do you really want a spectacled caiman? If so, you may believe, like I discovered, that the pleasures of keeping caiman can far outweigh the initial fear of them. If that is the case, and you have the necessary experience and understand what you may be getting into, then this article is for you.

## Caiman Require Space

If you have never kept a spectacled caiman, I recommend starting with a hatchling that is about 9 inches long. (Spectacled caiman hatchlings look a lot like Nile crocodile hatchlings, much more than they resemble alligators, *Alligator mississippiensis*. Alligator hatchlings have yellow and black stripes, spectacled caiman don't.) Don't try to feed your new caiman right away. Give it about three days to get used to its new surroundings.

A caiman enclosure should incorporate both land and water areas, and you should have it set up and ready to go, in regard to heating, lighting and water filtration, before you bring your hatchling home. The land area should be large enough to allow your caiman to completely leave the water and to turn around comfortably without bumping into anything. Heat elements should be placed over the land area; use them to create a hot basking area. The water section of the enclosure should be larger, with a width at least twice the length of the caiman and a length three times that. These are minimum dimensions.

It is a myth that a caiman will grow only as large as its enclosure, and they readily outgrow enclosures that are too small for them. An adult male caiman can grow to 6 feet, and an adult female can average 4½ feet. As they grow -- and they will grow -- you need to match their growth and size with the proper accommodations. Spectacled caiman hatchlings can be kept in aquariums or Rubbermaid-type plastic tubs, but they will soon outgrow such enclosures, and you will need to provide something much larger. I keep groups of hatchlings in large, plastic tubs, with bricks and rocks provided for haul-out areas, and large-leafed aquatic plants floating in the water for cover. Eventually they are moved to large communal outdoor enclosures with water areas provided by commercially made fish ponds that are sunken in the ground, allowing easy access for the caiman.

A full-grown caiman will need a room-sized enclosure that incorporates a pool or an outdoor area with a pond. For an adult male, you will need an enclosure measuring at least 24 by 30 feet, with a water area that is at least 12 by 18. If you plan to keep your caiman in an outdoor pen-type enclosure with walls around it, they must be at least 6 feet tall, because a caiman can lunge itself the length of its body. Be prepared to refill the water occasionally; caiman swimming and splashing can reduce the water level fairly quickly.

Spectacled caiman do well in an air and water temperature of 85 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit. As with many reptiles, provide a temperature gradient, with a warmer end and a cooler end in the enclosure. If you are using heat lamps or keep your “spec” outdoors so it can bask in the sun, you can provide a cooler area by planting a small tree or other vegetation, perhaps overhanging the water, at one end of the enclosure. If you are keeping caiman indoors they need full-spectrum lighting as well as heating elements to maintain the recommended temperatures. I leave the heating elements on at night.

Your caiman’s water needs to be kept clean, and it may need to be heated, too. Use filters and pumps that are calibrated for the amount of water you have in your setup. Standard aquarium filters and pumps may be okay for awhile if you’re keeping a single hatchling or two in a smaller enclosure, but when your caiman grow and occupy larger enclosures with pools of water you will need to start using pond equipment to maintain water quality and optimal temperatures.

If you are keeping your caiman outdoors, and you live in an area that has cold winter weather, you must make arrangements to shelter your caiman at that time of year. Caiman will die in temperatures that remain below 60 degrees or so for any length of time. You can bring them indoors, or construct a covered greenhouse-type structure over their outdoor pens, covered with plastic sheeting. These structures can be heated to keep your caiman safe.

Large enclosures that are kept clean, including the water, and at the right temperature are a must for healthy caiman. If its water isn’t clean, a caiman will get sick, and if it gets too cold, it will die. Likewise, if a caiman gets too hot, it can overheat and die. Always keep the water clean and maintain the recommended temperatures. Use thermometers to keep track of the temperature, both in the air and in the water.

#### Meat-Eaters to the Core

By the time a hatchling spectacled caiman is 9 inches long it should be eating pinkies. If it’s smaller, it may still be eating crickets. If this is the case with yours, offer it about 20 crickets a day, and dust them with a calcium supplement. As your caiman grows, offer it bigger prey. A good guideline – one that is used with many reptiles -- is to offer your caiman food items that are equal to or smaller than its head. As your pet grows, so can the size of its food items.

After crickets, offer pinkies and then adult mice. After mice, offer rats. Feed your caiman these rodents, alive or frozen/thawed, two or three times per week. Once your caiman reaches about 3 feet in length, you can begin feeding it chunks of raw meat once a week.

Spectacled caiman are strictly carnivorous. They like meat. You can feed them chicken, but I prefer to not feed them too much because I believe the additives in some chicken meat could affect their offspring and breeding. You can offer them live fish by placing them in your caiman’s water, but I don’t recommend doing this too often or offering too many fish. Spectacled caiman will eat pretty much any meat in addition to rodents, fish and chicken, including deer, beef and even roadkill. If a prey animal is too big, in order to meet the “no pieces bigger than your caiman’s head” rule, you may need to cut it into smaller pieces before offering it to your caiman.

I feed my adult caiman raw meat once a week. They each eat approximately 1 pound of meat, and if the meat I’m offering is boneless, I coat it with a reptile calcium supplement before giving it to them. On occasion, live rats or small bunnies are offered instead of raw meat. The problem with feeding your caiman animals is that the hair is indigestible, so you may end up with really nasty, smelly, hairy caiman poop clogging up your water filters.

Designate a specific feeding area in your caiman’s enclosure, and always place the food in that spot. Locate it away from any filters or pumps. By doing this, your caiman should eventually learn to tell the difference between you coming to feed it and you coming to change the filters or perform pump maintenance. This comes in handy, because you don’t want your caiman to start snapping at you every time you reach your hand in the water to clean the filter, and, believe me, once your caiman begins eating raw meat, you will be changing the filter! You won’t need to be reminded to clean the filter regularly, because caiman poop is the smelliest substance I have ever had the misfortune to be around.

If possible, feed your caiman in the evening. This is when wild caiman most often feed. They spend most of the day basking, and they hunt and eat at night.

I hope I have conveyed to you how challenging it is to keep a spectacled caiman. If after reading this you still feel the need to run out and get yourself the meanest pet on the block – one that you will likely have for many years, as wild caiman can live to be 75 or so -- do your research first and be prepared to take the caiman challenge. Once you have a pet caiman, you'll have years of stories to tell to your grandkids!

#### IN A BOX

##### Exceptions to the Rule

An average male caiman can attain 6 feet, and a female 4½ feet, but these are averages. We once took in a 4-foot female with mouth rot. We treated her with antibiotics, teeth cleanings and bottle-feeding until she could fend for herself (imagine, if you will, trying to give a 4-foot crocodilian a teeth cleaning). Once she was able to eat on her own we added her to the main caiman pond, with two males and three other females, and she grew to 6 feet.

#### BIO

Bam Rubenstein has owned caiman since 1969, and he enjoys educating scores of next-generation herpetologists about these amazing crocodilians. He began rescuing caiman in 2002, receiving them from Texas Parks and Wildlife, Round Rock Animal Control, Bayou Beasts and other respected organizations. He owns and operates CaimanHunter.com and, along with his friend and partner Shane Lewis, has provided refuge and found homes for dozens of rescued caiman.