

WALNUT CREEK SUPPLY

THE COMPLETE CARE GUIDE

Chinese Water Dragon

Tall enclosures, warm water and a lizard that learns your face



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New owner? Go straight to Section 1. It is written so you can set up a safe, correct home and get through the first 48 hours without reading anything else first.

Chinese water dragons are the closest thing the reptile hobby has to a real dragon living in your home — brilliant emerald green scales, a serrated crest running from neck to tail tip, and a long whip tail that seems too dramatic to be real. That beauty pulls people toward them, and it should. The honest follow-up is that they are among the more demanding lizards for a first-time keeper, not because they are fragile, but because their requirements are non-negotiable and they communicate stress in ways that can cause serious physical damage before a new keeper recognizes what's happening. A water dragon who cannot make sense of the glass walls of his enclosure will rub his snout raw in days. A setup without a real water feature fails within weeks. Get the enclosure tall and humid, build a genuine water feature before the animal arrives, cover three walls so he can't see himself, and you will have an active, personable lizard who can live happily alongside your family for fifteen years. This guide starts at step one. Read the Quick Start before anything else — the water feature rule and the opaque-background rule save faces.

SECTION 1

Quick Start: Your First 48 Hours

1. **Fill and test the water feature before your dragon arrives — no exceptions.** The water section is not optional enrichment; it is mandatory infrastructure unique to this species. Fill it, run the filter or commit to the daily-change schedule, let it reach temperature (aim for 76–80°F), and confirm there are no leaks before any animal enters the enclosure. Add a reptile-safe water conditioner if you're on tap water — chlorine and chloramine must be neutralized.
2. **Set up the entire enclosure first, at the correct size.** Minimum for an adult is **48" × 24" × 48" (L × W × H)**. Both height and length matter — height for the climbing and basking structure, length for a proper thermal gradient plus a water feature at the cool end. Glass, PVC, or sealed wooden builds all work; wire-mesh-only enclosures will not hold the 70–80% humidity this species requires.
3. **Install and secure the main climbing branch before turning on the heat.** Anchor a sturdy branch thick enough for the dragon's full grip at a diagonal angle from the land-side floor up toward the basking lamp, with the tip landing roughly 10–14 inches from the heat source. Test its stability firmly — an adult CWD is a substantial animal and will trust that branch with his full weight at speed.
4. **Cover three walls with opaque material before the dragon ever sees the enclosure.** This is the single most important snout-rub prevention step and it costs almost nothing. Cork bark tile panels, foam rock backgrounds, frosted vinyl, or fixed non-reflective material all work. The back wall and both side walls must be fully covered. The interior should also minimize flat reflective surfaces — no shiny decor, no mirror-finish dishes.
5. **Establish the thermal gradient and verify it with thermometers before the animal goes in.** Basking spot at the branch surface directly under the lamp: **90–95°F**. Warm ambient air at dragon height: **80–85°F**. Cool end air: **75–80°F**. Use a calibrated probe thermometer for ambient readings and an infrared temperature gun for surface spot checks. A temperature strip stuck to the outside glass reads glass temperature, not air temperature — it is not a useful measurement.
6. **Install the UVB lamp over the basking branch on the warm side.** This species is a Ferguson Zone 3 high-UVB user. A T5 HO 6% or 10% tube, positioned per the manufacturer's distance table for the chosen product. Photoperiod 12 hours on / 12 hours off. Mark the installation date on the ballast — replace annually regardless of whether the tube still lights.
7. **Add live plants to support humidity and reduce visual stress.** Pothos, ficus benjamina, hibiscus, and Tradescantia all tolerate high humidity and are non-toxic to reptiles. Dense planting breaks sightlines, which reduces the frequency with which the dragon sees his own reflection in the front glass, and plant mass contributes meaningfully to keeping humidity stable between misting sessions.

8. **Lay down the land-section substrate — coconut coir and organic topsoil — to a depth of 3–4 inches.** Mist it until it holds shape when squeezed but doesn't pool water. Slope the substrate gently down toward the water feature edge and border the transition with cork bark or smooth stones to prevent substrate from washing into the water.
9. **Place the dragon in the enclosure, close the doors, and give him 48–72 hours of minimal disturbance.** Quiet food and water checks once daily. No tapping the glass, no handling attempts, no rearranging decor. A CWD who just arrived is operating on adrenaline — the water feature and the branch structure are the two things that will reduce that stress fastest if they're in place and working.
10. **Find your exotic reptile vet before you need one.** Chinese water dragons require a keeper who has genuine experience with agamid lizards. Call ahead, confirm they see this species, ask about after-hours protocol, and write the number on the front of the enclosure stand. Finding out there's no qualified vet nearby at 8 p.m. on a Saturday is the wrong time to discover it.

First-Time Starter Bundle

Everything that should be in the house on day one, and what to look for in each category.

Essentials

- **A tall, front-opening enclosure** — minimum 48" × 24" × 48" for one adult; juveniles can start in a 36" × 18" × 36" and transition at 12–15 months. Front-opening panels are important — reaching down from above mimics a predator's strike and triggers a hard flight response in a species already prone to panic.
- **A water feature with filtration or a committed daily-change protocol** — a built-in tub, a large food-safe container, or a custom waterfall or pond feature occupying the cool end of the enclosure. Minimum water depth **6–8 inches**, minimum footprint large enough for a full-grown CWD to fully submerge and turn around in. An aquarium corner filter or small canister filter dramatically reduces the time between required water changes.
- **A basking lamp on a quality dimmer thermostat** — a halogen flood or a ceramic heat emitter wired to a thermostat with the probe on the basking branch surface. No unregulated heat sources; a CWD resting directly below an unregulated lamp can sustain burns before it moves.
- **A Ferguson Zone 3 UVB tube** — T5 HO 6% or 10%, positioned per the manufacturer's distance table for the chosen tube and wattage. Non-negotiable for long-term bone health and immune function.
- **Two calibrated digital thermometers with probes** — one at the basking zone, one at the cool end. A handheld infrared temperature gun for surface-reading branches and rocks.
- **A digital hygrometer** — positioned at mid-enclosure height away from the water feature for an accurate ambient reading. Target 70–80%.
- **An automatic misting system or a reliable hand mister** — twice-daily misting is the baseline; an automatic system removes the guesswork and is worth the investment for a humidity-dependent species.
- **Climbing branches and cork rounds** — anchored securely; a main basking branch angled from the floor toward the heat source plus secondary horizontal perches at mid-height. Nothing that can roll or collapse under the animal's weight.
- **Opaque background material for three walls** — applied before the first animal ever enters the enclosure.
- **Feeder insects** — dubia roaches and crickets as initial staples; sourced from a quality captive-bred supplier, never wild-caught.
- **Calcium powder without D3** — for every-feeding dusting in juveniles; every-other-feeding for adults.
- **Calcium with D3 and a reptile multivitamin** — for the supplement rotation detailed in the Feeding section.

- **Reptile-safe water conditioner** — if on municipal tap water, chlorine and chloramine must be neutralized at every water change.

Enrichment

- **Live plants** — pothos, ficus, hibiscus, and Tradescantia tolerate the humidity and give the dragon visual cover, something to climb through, and meaningful passive humidity support. More plant mass means more stability in the humidity number.
- **Cork tubes and rounds at varying heights** — visual barriers and intermediate resting points between the floor and the main basking branch; the dragon should never have to cross completely exposed open space to get anywhere.
- **A secondary basking perch at mid-height** — a flat rock ledge or broad cork board at mid-enclosure gives the animal a choice about basking intensity and a staging point for climbing.
- **A ceramic food bowl for greens** — shallow, heavy enough to not tip when the dragon steps in it, positioned on the land side near the warm ambient zone.
- **A drip wall or waterfall feature** — dripping or flowing water over cork bark or a foam background wall is highly attractive to CWDs and will encourage use of the water feature from the first day in a way that still water sometimes doesn't.
- **A sturdy ventilated travel carrier** — sized so the dragon can lie flat with a small piece of cork bark inside; kept ready for vet visits rather than improvised at departure time.

SECTION 2

Meet Your Chinese Water Dragon

Wild Chinese water dragons (*Physignathus cocincinus*) live along the banks of tropical rainforest streams and rivers across Southeast Asia — southern China, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia — in an environment defined by dense overhead canopy, year-round high humidity, and constant proximity to moving water. They are genuinely at home in two environments at once: agile, confident climbers in the trees and understory above, and practiced swimmers and bathers in the streams below. When threatened, a wild CWD's first choice is to drop directly from a branch into the water below and either hold still on the stream bed for up to 25 minutes or swim rapidly downstream to safety. That dual identity — **semi-arboreal and semi-aquatic** — is the organizing principle behind every element of their captive care.

Trait	Detail
Common name	Chinese water dragon
Scientific name	<i>Physignathus cocincinus</i>
Native range	Southern China, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia
Wild habitat	Tropical rainforest stream banks, dense understory vegetation
Adult length	24–36 inches total (snout to tail tip); tail accounts for 60–70%
Adult weight	180–280 g; males typically larger and stockier
Typical lifespan	10–15 years with correct care
Activity pattern	Diurnal — most active during the day, heaviest basking in the morning
Social structure	Solitary — one per enclosure unless a proven compatible male-female pair with a very large setup
Temperament	Flighty and fast when young; docile and personable with consistent handling
Unique trait	Parietal eye on top of skull — senses light cycles and aids thermoregulation

The dual life: why water is infrastructure, not decoration

The semi-aquatic and semi-arboreal dual identity is the single most important concept in CWD husbandry, and it distinguishes this species from nearly every other commonly kept lizard. Most reptile enclosures are designed as primarily terrestrial or primarily arboreal spaces. A CWD needs both simultaneously, and the water feature is not a large water bowl — it is a functional habitat element that must be deep enough for full submersion, wide enough for the animal to turn around, and clean enough that daily use does not cause bacterial illness.

The **parietal eye** is worth a specific mention because it surprises most new keepers when they see it for the first time. It appears as a small, pale oval scale on the very top of the skull, centered between and slightly behind the eyes, and it is frequently mistaken for a wound, a parasite, or a skin anomaly. It is none of those things. The parietal eye is a light-sensing organ present in many lizards and tuataras; it does not form images but detects changes in light intensity and plays a role in thermoregulation and circadian rhythm. It is sensitive to direct pressure and direct bright light. Do not cover it, press on it, or apply topical treatments to it. It is normal, functional anatomy that simply looks unusual.

What surprises new owners

The size surprises almost everyone. A full-grown CWD at 24–36 inches is a substantial animal — visually impressive, physically quick, and needing real estate that reflects that size. A keeper coming from smaller lizards will feel the scale difference in the first

week. Plan for an adult enclosure and an adult setup from the beginning; transitioning a settled CWD to a larger space mid-growth is more disruptive than building it right the first time.

The snout-rubbing issue is the second surprise, and the more urgent one. Chinese water dragons rub their snout against glass walls at a rate that genuinely alarms new keepers — and the damage accumulates within days, not weeks. The instinct is their inability to process a transparent barrier as a solid wall. When a CWD sees the room through the glass, he tries to walk through it. When he sees his own reflection, he interprets it as a rival and charges. The result is **rostral abrasions** — raw, bleeding tissue at the snout tip — that become infected rapidly and can permanently damage the face of an otherwise healthy animal. Three opaque walls and attention to reflective surfaces inside the enclosure prevent the overwhelming majority of snout-rubbing incidents. This is addressed in depth in Common Challenges.

The humidity requirement is the third surprise: 70–80% is not a modest upward adjustment from a standard room environment; it is tropical rainforest humidity. A keeper in a dry climate who buys a CWD and a basic screen-top terrarium will have an animal with chronic shed failure and a respiratory infection within a few months. A large water feature, live plants, a semi-sealed enclosure, and an automatic misting system are all working in combination to maintain this number.

SECTION 3

Enclosure Setup & Layout

The enclosure: tall, large, and sealed enough to hold humidity

The minimum for one adult CWD is **48" × 24" × 48" (L × W × H)**. Height is critical because CWDs climb constantly and a functional basking branch at a useful height from a floor that also accommodates a water feature requires genuine vertical space. Length is critical because the thermal gradient runs horizontally and the cool water feature needs to be on the opposite end from the warm basking zone. PVC reptile enclosures with solid lower panels, glass terrariums with minimal mesh, and sealed wooden vivariums all work. Full-screen enclosures will not hold the humidity this species requires. A partial mesh vent at the upper portion of one side wall provides necessary airflow without dumping all the humidity into the room.

The water feature: first priority, most careful thought

The water section occupies approximately one-third of the enclosure floor on the cool end. Minimum water depth: **6–8 inches**, measured at the deepest point. An adult CWD must be able to fully submerge — they use submersion for stress reduction, thermal regulation, skin hydration, and shedding assistance, not just drinking. The minimum footprint for an adult is roughly 16" × 16"; larger is better and should be the goal wherever enclosure dimensions allow. The entry point from the land section to the water should not require a dangerous drop — a sloped cork bark ramp, a slate slope, or a gently angled rock face down to the water's surface gives the dragon a safe entry and exit at any speed.

Water temperature should be matched to the cool end ambient: **75–80°F**. Never fill with cold tap water during a change — a dragon who steps into suddenly cold water during his normal soaking behavior is receiving a thermal shock event. Pre-warm replacement water to the correct range before every change.

Filtration is not optional. A small hang-on-back aquarium filter, a submersible corner filter, or a small canister filter rated for the water volume will dramatically reduce bacterial load. With filtration: **50% water change twice weekly** plus a full change and container scrub monthly. Without filtration: **full water change daily**, plus a container wipe. An unfiltered setup that isn't changed daily becomes a bacterial health hazard within 48 hours at enclosure temperatures.

Climbing infrastructure and land section

The main basking branch is the centerpiece of the land section. It should be thick enough for the dragon's feet to grip fully, anchored so it cannot shift under load, and angled upward toward the heat source so the tip sits at the correct basking distance. Confirm the basking-spot temperature at the tip with an IR gun after the lamp is warm. A secondary horizontal perch at mid-enclosure height gives the animal a staging point and reduces the amount of time spent crossing the floor between the water feature and the basking branch.

The land substrate (detailed in the next section) should sit 3–4 inches deep on the warm side, sloping gently toward the water. A stone or cork-bark border at the water's edge prevents substrate from washing in during the dragon's entry and exit, which is energetic and splashy. The border also provides a clear tactile transition between environments that new animals quickly learn to use.

Opaque backgrounds: the snout-rub prevention that costs almost nothing

Three walls must be covered before any animal enters the enclosure. The front glass remains clear — but even the front can be covered with removable frosted film for the first two weeks while a new animal settles in. Back wall and both side walls must be:

- **Fully opaque** — the room behind the glass must not be visible from inside
- **Non-reflective on the interior face** — a glossy black background is worse than nothing
- **Securely attached** so the dragon cannot dislodge and ingest pieces

Cork bark panels attached with reptile-safe silicone, dense foam rock backgrounds, fixed cork tile, and matte-finish vinyl sheeting all work. Inside the enclosure, avoid smooth glass decorations, mirror-finish rocks, and shiny ceramic dishes. Dense live plant coverage between the climbing structure and the glass further reduces the frequency with which the dragon makes direct face contact with the front glass.

SECTION 4

Substrate Guide

The land section of a CWD enclosure needs a substrate that holds moisture well, allows partial burrowing, supports live plant roots, and doesn't become anaerobic when kept damp. The water section of the enclosure needs a completely different surface — easy to clean, non-toxic in water, and smooth enough not to injure the dragon's feet. These are distinct requirements and should be planned separately.

Substrate	Best for	Performance	Notes
Coconut coir + organic topsoil (60:40)	Land section; all ages	Excellent moisture retention, minimal dust, holds shape when damp, safe if small amounts ingested, supports live plant roots	The standard recommendation; keep the top inch barely moist; refresh top layer monthly
Cypress mulch	Land section; adults	Good moisture retention, natural appearance, easy to spot-clean, low dust	Confirm no cedar or aromatic pine in the product mix; check the ingredient label
Bioactive soil mix (coir + topsoil + leaf litter + springtails/isopods)	Land section; experienced keepers	Excellent humidity buffering; full naturalistic setup with live clean-up crew; high long-term value	More complex to establish; not beginner-appropriate from day one; springtails and isopods required for waste breakdown
Smooth rounded river stones or aquarium-safe tile	Water feature floor	Non-toxic, does not cloud water, easy to scrub, supports filter placement	The best water-section surface; large enough that the dragon cannot swallow them
Paper towel or non-adhesive shelf liner	Quarantine and hospital setups	Sterile; easy to inspect; zero ingestion risk	Not appropriate long-term in a high-humidity enclosure; correct for initial quarantine and sick animals
Fine loose sand	Avoid outright	Clouds the water feature badly; impaction risk if ingested; poor moisture retention for land section	Wrong for this species in any configuration
Cedar or aromatic pine shavings	Never	Aromatic volatile oils are directly toxic to reptiles	No safe application for any reptile at any age
Calcium or vitamin sand	Avoid outright	Clouds water; impaction risk; does not reliably supplement calcium despite product marketing	Not appropriate for CWDs
Aquarium pea gravel in the water section	Avoid	Ingestion risk; gets trapped between toe scales; much harder to sanitize than smooth stone	Smooth river stones are strictly safer in every way

Water-side vs. land-side substrate: keep the zones distinct

The most important substrate concept for CWDs is maintaining a clear boundary between the two zones. Water-section substrate should be smooth rounded stone, flat aquarium tile, or bare glass or PVC — nothing that clouds the water or cannot be thoroughly sanitized at water-change time. Land-section substrate should be 3–4 inches deep, moisture-retentive, and free of materials that could contaminate the water feature when the dragon splashes in from the land side. A stone border, slate strip, or cork-bark edge at the transition point keeps things where they belong and gives the keeper a visual reference for where the cleaning zone of each section begins.

SECTION 5

Heat, UVB & Humidity — The 3 Numbers

For Chinese water dragons, heat, UVB, and humidity are more interdependent than for most commonly kept reptile species. High humidity without adequate enclosure ventilation leads to respiratory infection. Low humidity at the correct temperature leads to dysecdysis — failed, retained shed — and chronic skin problems. Insufficient UVB alongside high-calcium supplementation leads to metabolic bone disease (MBD) because D3 synthesis in the skin is the primary absorption mechanism. All three numbers need to be correct simultaneously and continuously.

Parameter	Target value	How to measure it	What goes wrong when it's off
Basking spot surface temperature	90–95° F	IR temperature gun on basking branch surface	Too low: incomplete thermoregulation, slow digestion; too high: branch avoidance, heat stress, burns
Warm ambient air temperature	80–85° F	Probe thermometer at dragon height on warm side	Below 78°F: incomplete thermoregulation, immune suppression, slow digestion
Cool end air temperature	75–80° F	Probe thermometer at cool-end floor level	Below 72°F: thermal shock when using the water feature; above 82°F: no cool refuge exists, gradient fails
Overnight temperature	70–75° F	Same probes with overhead heat off	Below 65°F: respiratory infection risk, immune suppression; never allow to drop below 65°F
Ambient enclosure humidity	70–80%	Digital hygrometer at mid-enclosure, away from water feature	Below 60%: dysecdysis, dehydration despite water access, skin quality decline; above 85% with poor ventilation: respiratory infection
UVB output (Ferguson Zone 3)	UVI 2.0–3.0	Solarmeter 6.5R, or follow manufacturer's distance table for specific tube and brand	Too low: MBD, poor calcium absorption regardless of supplementation; too high: UV eye damage, skin irritation
Water feature temperature	75–80° F	Aquarium thermometer inside the water feature	Too cold: respiratory stress from thermal shock on entry; too warm: accelerated bacterial growth

The water feature's role in humidity

A large open water feature sitting at 76–80°F in an enclosure running at 80–85°F ambient generates significant evaporation — one of the most effective and entirely passive ways to maintain the 70–80% humidity this species needs. This is a second reason the water feature is mandatory beyond its direct use by the dragon. An enclosure with a generously sized water feature and a decent plant canopy will often maintain 65–70% ambient humidity with minimal misting, and topping up to 75–80% with twice-daily misting is far more manageable than trying to build humidity from nothing in a dry setup with a tiny water dish.

Misting schedule and tools

Mist twice daily — once when the UVB lamp comes on in the morning and once about an hour before lights out. Each session should visibly wet the plant leaves and background walls, not just leave a light surface fog. An automatic misting system with nozzles aimed at the back wall and plant canopy is the most reliable way to hit the target consistently; hand misting works well but requires discipline about timing. Between sessions, check the hygrometer. If ambient humidity consistently falls below 65%, add more plant coverage or reduce ventilation slightly before increasing misting frequency — misting more frequently into a setup that dries too fast is treating the symptom rather than the cause.

UVB: Ferguson Zone 3 and why it's non-negotiable

Chinese water dragons are **Ferguson Zone 3** lizards — high-UV users who bask in direct or near-direct sunlight in their native rainforest canopy clearings for significant parts of the day. This is a meaningfully higher UVB requirement than, for example, a leopard gecko at Zone 1. A T5 HO 6% tube at the low end; a T5 HO 10% tube for a more accurate output. Position the tube directly over the basking branch on the warm side, at the manufacturer's recommended distance for the specific product. The photoperiod matches the basking lamp: 12 hours on / 12 hours off. Replace the tube every 12 months on the calendar regardless of whether it still visibly lights. UV output degrades substantially before visible light output does, and a one-year-old T5 HO tube that looks fine may be delivering a small fraction of its day-one UVI reading.

SECTION 6

Feeding & Nutrition



Mostly insects with a steady supply of leafy greens and vegetables alongside. Variety across the week matters more than any single food.

Chinese water dragons are **omnivores**, and their diet has a specific structure that looks different from most commonly kept lizards. The approximate ratio is **70% insects, 20% leafy greens and vegetables, 10% occasional treat items**. The insect percentage is genuinely the foundation — a CWD fed predominantly on greens with occasional insects will show calcium deficiency, poor growth, and low energy within months. A CWD fed only insects with occasional greens will do well nutritionally but will miss the fiber, variety, and hydration that the vegetable component provides over a long life. Both sides of the ratio earn their place.

Feeder insect and food guide

Feeder / Food Item	Category	Notes
Dubia roaches	Insect staple	Excellent protein-to-fat ratio, low chitin, no odor, easy to gut-load; the backbone of the CWD insect diet
Crickets	Insect staple	High protein, very widely available; gut-load carefully; remove uneaten crickets within 30 minutes — they will bite

Feeder / Food Item	Category	Notes
Hornworms	Insect occasional	Very high moisture content, soft-bodied, accepted eagerly; excellent hydration feeder; offer when still small
Waxworms	Insect occasional — limit carefully	Very high fat; useful as an appetite stimulator for a recovering or underweight dragon; not a routine feeder
Mealworms	Insect limited	Higher chitin content, moderate fat; occasional rotation only; a poor choice as a primary feeder
Silkworms	Insect occasional	Very good nutrition and soft body; harder to source consistently than dubias or crickets
Small feeder fish (guppies, small minnows)	Occasional treat	CWDs hunt live fish instinctively; dropping feeder fish into the water feature is highly enriching; limit to once weekly; avoid thiaminase-heavy species like goldfish as a regular source
Small pinkies (adults only)	Rare occasional treat	High protein and fat; once monthly maximum for a healthy adult; never for juveniles; use sparingly in females prone to weight gain
Collard greens	Vegetable staple	Low oxalate, high calcium-to-phosphorus ratio; the most reliable primary green for CWDs
Mustard greens	Vegetable staple	High nutritional value; rotate with collard greens as the primary green base
Dandelion greens (pesticide-free)	Vegetable staple	Outstanding calcium-to-phosphorus ratio; broadly accepted by CWDs; can be grown easily at home
Bell pepper	Vegetable regular	High vitamin C content; most colors accepted; cut into small pieces
Butternut or acorn squash	Vegetable regular	Good fiber and hydration; remove seeds before offering
Mango or papaya (small amounts)	Fruit occasional — 10% or less	Useful as an appetite stimulator; fructose content is real, do not let fruit dominate the vegetable portion
Spinach, beet greens, Swiss chard	Use sparingly	High oxalate content binds dietary calcium; occasional small amounts in a varied diet are fine, but never a primary green
Avocado, rhubarb, onion, garlic	Never	Toxic to reptiles
Wild-caught insects	Never	Pesticide and parasite risk; captive-reared feeders from a reputable supplier are strictly safer in every way

Supplement schedule

Calcium metabolism is the most common nutritional failure point in CWD husbandry, and it requires a consistent two-part supplementation protocol for the life of the animal.

What	When	Why
Calcium powder without D3	Every feeding for juveniles; every other feeding for adults; dust feeders lightly before offering	Provides raw calcium for bone maintenance and muscle function

What	When	Why
Calcium with D3	Twice monthly	D3 is fat-soluble and accumulates; twice-monthly dosing provides adequate levels without risk of oversupplementation
Reptile multivitamin	Once monthly	Covers trace minerals and vitamins that gut-loading alone may not fully supply across a varied diet

Feeding frequency by age

Life stage	Age	Frequency	Portion guidelines
Hatchling	0–4 months	Daily	6–10 small appropriately-sized insects per feeding; introduce greens alongside from the start even if initially ignored
Juvenile	4–12 months	Daily	10–15 appropriately-sized insects plus a small portion of greens; calcium every feeding
Sub-adult	12–18 months	5 days per week	Mix of insects and greens at the 70/20 ratio; treat items introduced carefully
Adult	18 months+	Every other day	Full 70/20/10 ratio; adjust portion based on body condition and seasonal activity level

Prey sizing and gut-loading

No feeder insect should be wider than the distance between the dragon's eyes — the same rule that applies to virtually every insectivore. Oversized prey causes impaction and stress during feeding, particularly in juveniles. Gut-load all insects for at least 24–48 hours before offering: collard greens, dandelion greens, squash, sweet potato, and a quality dry commercial gut-load mix provide a nutritional foundation that doubles the value of every feeding. An insect offered immediately from a shipping container has minimal nutritional content; a well-loaded insect is meaningfully different. Dusting supplements what gut-loading cannot provide, but gut-loading is the foundation, not the other way around.

SECTION 7

Water Feature & Hydration

The water feature deserves its own section because it is simultaneously the most important element of a CWD setup and the most commonly underbuilt. It functions as a habitat requirement, a primary hydration source, a thermoregulation tool, a shedding aid, a behavioral enrichment outlet, and a passive humidity generator. Getting it right from the beginning prevents cascading problems in every other area of the care.

Water quality and maintenance

Chinese water dragons defecate in water — reliably, regularly, and in volume relative to their size. Even with good filtration, the bacterial load builds quickly. The maintenance schedule is non-negotiable:

- **Every day:** visual check; remove any visible waste; confirm water temperature is 75–80°F
- **Twice weekly:** 50% water change with temperature-matched, conditioned fresh water; wipe accessible walls of the container
- **Monthly:** full water change; remove all decor and water-section substrate; scrub the container thoroughly with reptile-safe disinfectant; rinse until no disinfectant odor remains; refill with fresh conditioned water at the correct temperature

Tap water must be treated with a reptile-safe water conditioner that neutralizes both chlorine and chloramine at every water change without exception. Chlorinated water is a direct irritant to the mucous membranes and will actively worsen any existing rostral abrasions. Water temperature at change time must be within 2–3°F of the existing water — a sudden cold fill is a genuine thermal shock event for an animal that may step into the feature mid-change.

Filtration choices: a small hang-on-back aquarium filter or a submersible corner filter rated for the water volume moves waste to a mechanical filter pad, dramatically reducing bacterial bloom. Even filtered setups require the twice-weekly partial change because the reptile's waste load in this small volume of water is high. A CWD's water feature is not comparable to a fish tank at steady state; treat it more like a koi pond in a very warm room.

Depth, size, and entry

Minimum depth: **6–8 inches** at the deepest point. The dragon must be able to fully submerge without standing. Full submersion is used for stress relief, thermoregulation, drinking, skin hydration, and shedding — it is not an occasional luxury behavior; it is how this animal is built to function. Minimum footprint for a single adult: approximately 16" × 16", with larger being better and worth building for where enclosure dimensions allow. The entry point must be accessible without a dangerous drop. A gradual slate slope, a cork bark ramp, or a textured foam background that dips into the water all provide a safe, repeatable entry and exit at whatever speed the dragon chooses.

Training a new CWD to use the water feature

Some CWDs discover and use the water feature within their first hour in the enclosure. Others, particularly captive-bred juveniles who have never encountered a real body of water, will treat it with deep suspicion for the first week or two. Several approaches help:

- **Introduce moving or dripping water.** Flowing water is a far stronger behavioral cue than still water for CWDs — it mimics the sound and visual signature of the rainforest streams they evolved alongside. A small drip feature over cork bark into the water, or a waterfall foam panel, converts hesitant animals far faster than a still pool.
- **Place the dragon near the water edge during supervised time outside the enclosure.** Let him approach and investigate on his own terms rather than placing him directly in the water.
- **Keep the water scrupulously clean during the first month.** An animal who approaches dirty water and smells bacterial bloom will associate the feature with a negative experience and avoid it more consistently going forward.

- **Give it two weeks minimum.** Some animals need that long to feel settled enough in the enclosure to explore new elements. A dragon who is still mapping his basking route and his climbing structure is not ready to investigate the water feature.

Signs of dehydration

Despite high ambient humidity and a large water feature, CWDs can become dehydrated — most commonly through respiratory illness, prolonged access issues, or an enclosure where humidity has been chronically below target. Signs to watch for:

- Sunken or dull eyes that lack their usual brightness
- Skin that "tents" — pinched lightly at the neck fold, it does not spring back smoothly
- Urates that are dark orange or rust-brown rather than white
- Dry, flaking skin between shed cycles rather than the smooth transitions seen in a hydrated animal
- Unusual lethargy and reluctance to bask

A dehydrated CWD should be placed in a warm shallow soak (80°F, conditioned water, belly-depth) for 20–30 minutes. The enclosure humidity and water feature accessibility should then be investigated and corrected before the next feeding — dehydration in a well-built CWD enclosure is almost always a setup problem, not an animal problem.

SECTION 8

Shedding

Chinese water dragons shed their skin in sections rather than in one complete piece like a snake. Juveniles shed frequently during their first year — **roughly every three to four weeks** as they grow rapidly. Adults shed less often: **every four to eight weeks** depending on season, nutritional status, and activity level. Before a shed, the skin will appear dull, faded, or slightly grey-blue, and the dragon may reduce eating for a day or two. Both are completely normal. Do not offer food to a dragon in obvious pre-shed; an uneaten feeder insect left in the enclosure during a shed will bite, and a bite on fresh new skin becomes infected fast.

High humidity as the primary shed aid

At 70–80% ambient humidity, the majority of CWD sheds complete cleanly without any intervention from the keeper. The water feature provides an additional layer of shed support that most other reptile setups cannot replicate: a dragon in pre-shed will typically spend significantly more time in the water feature than usual, using full submersion to help the old skin layer hydrate and loosen. This is the biological equivalent of the deliberate soak sessions keepers of drier reptile species have to engineer separately — in a correctly built CWD enclosure, it happens naturally as part of the animal's normal behavior.

Stuck shed on toes and tail tip

Even in a well-maintained high-humidity setup, retained shed occurs most commonly at the very tips of the toes and the tail tip — thin extremities where the shed skin can form a constricting ring that the animal cannot pull off itself. After every shed event, inspect all five toes on all four feet in good light. A grey band that persists around a toe tip after the rest of the shed has come off is retained shed requiring attention. Fifteen to twenty minutes in a warm-water soak followed by gentle loosening with a damp cotton swab resolves most cases. Never pull dry retained shed before soaking — dry shed is adhered to the fresh skin underneath, and peeling it without soaking risks tearing the new layer and creating an open wound. Always soak first, always.

The tail tip deserves particular vigilance in CWDs because the tail is extremely long and circulation at the very tip is minimal. Multiple rounds of unaddressed retained shed building up over successive shed cycles will constrict circulation and the tip can die. Inspect, soak, and loosen at every shed — it takes two minutes and prevents a permanent injury.

SECTION 9

Common Challenges & Solutions

Snout rubbing and rostral abrasions

What you see: the dragon pacing repeatedly along the front glass or a glass corner; pressing and scraping the snout tip against the transparent surface; raw, reddened, or bleeding tissue at the snout; in chronic cases, the snout tip is significantly eroded and may show infection. **Why:** Chinese water dragons cannot perceive a transparent barrier as solid. When they see the room through the glass, they try to walk through it; when they see their own reflection, they interpret it as a rival and charge. This is the single most common, most preventable, and most damaging routine husbandry failure specific to this species — rostral abrasions (**ROH-strul ab-RAY-zhuns**, meaning wounds at the snout tip) accumulate rapidly and become infected. **What to do:** cover all three non-front walls with opaque material immediately if not already done; reduce reflective surfaces inside the enclosure; add dense plant coverage between the climbing structure and the glass; if the front glass is showing snout marks, apply removable frosted window film for the settlement period. Clean any abraded tissue gently with dilute chlorhexidine solution on a cotton swab and keep it clean at every observation. **When to call a vet:** if the abrasion is deep, actively bleeding, or showing any sign of infection — swelling, discharge, darkened or necrotic-looking tissue — antibiotic support is beneficial and the wound will not heal cleanly without it.

Metabolic bone disease (MBD)

What you see: soft or rubbery lower jaw; bowing or deformity of the limbs and spine; trembling during movement or when gripping a branch; difficulty climbing or gripping; in severe cases, spontaneous fractures and complete loss of coordination. **Why:** insufficient calcium, D3, or UVB — or any combination. A UVB lamp past its annual replacement date may look fully functional while delivering a fraction of its original UV index, which is the most common invisible cause of MBD in otherwise well-intentioned setups. **What to do:** correct the supplement schedule immediately; replace the UVB lamp if it is beyond 12 months; offer soft-bodied, well-gut-loaded feeders that are easier to process; consult a reptile vet for injectable calcium or calcium gluconate support. **When to call a vet:** as soon as limb trembling or jaw softness is visible. Early-stage MBD is genuinely treatable; late-stage MBD causes permanent skeletal deformity that no supplement schedule can reverse.

Respiratory infection

What you see: mucus or bubbling at the mouth or nostrils; open-mouth breathing; audible clicking or wheezing during respiration; lethargy and loss of appetite; the dragon positioning itself with the head tilted upward, trying to drain fluid gravity-assists downward. **Why:** high humidity *without* adequate enclosure ventilation creates warm, stagnant, bacteria-laden air that directly predisposes a reptile to respiratory infection. A fully sealed enclosure with no airflow is a risk factor even when humidity is correctly high. An animal who was allowed to get too cold overnight — below 65°F — is also significantly more susceptible. **What to do:** improve ventilation with a partial mesh vent at the upper portion of one wall; confirm that overnight temperatures are holding above 65°F; a dragon showing audible or visible respiratory symptoms cannot be managed with a husbandry correction alone once symptoms are present. **When to call a vet:** within 24–48 hours of any audible breathing abnormality, open-mouth breathing, or visible nasal discharge. Respiratory infections in reptiles progress rapidly and require prescription antibiotic treatment.

Internal parasites

What you see: weight loss over weeks despite apparent normal feeding; loose, watery, or unusually colored stool that persists across multiple weeks; a dull, unthrifty appearance; in heavy infestations, regurgitation of food. Wild-caught CWDs carry near-universal parasite loads; even captive-bred animals can acquire parasites through contaminated feeder insects or contaminated substrate. **What to do:** a baseline fecal examination with a reptile-experienced vet should be part of the initial setup and quarantine protocol for any new animal, regardless of source. Targeted antiparasitic treatment based on the specific findings

of the fecal exam is far more effective and safer than broad-spectrum over-the-counter products. **When to call a vet:** for any new animal within the first 30 days as a baseline; for an established animal whenever weight loss or stool abnormality persists beyond two to three weeks.

Tail drop and regrowth (autotomy)

What you see: the tail separates from the body during an extreme stress event — a panicked handling attempt, a fall, a bite from an unsupervised feeder insect, or a severe threat response. The detached tail continues moving actively for several minutes after separation. The stump is a clean, rounded wound that seals quickly with minimal bleeding. **Why:** CWDs can voluntarily drop their tail under extreme stress — a behavior called **autotomy** (aw-TAH-tuh-mee) that evolved as a predator-escape mechanism. The tail regrows over weeks to months, but the regenerated tail has a cartilage core instead of bone, is typically smoother and shorter than the original, and stores fat differently. The regrown tail is functional but the original cannot be recovered. **What to do:** move the dragon to a clean, paper-towel-lined enclosure for the healing period to minimize infection risk; keep the stump clean and dry; offer slightly increased insect feeding to help the animal rebuild the energy reserves that were stored in the original tail. **When to call a vet:** if the stump swells, discharges, or develops discoloration beyond normal pink healing tissue within the first week.

Thermal burns

What you see: blistered, discolored, or lifting scales on the dorsal surface or sides; the dragon avoiding the basking branch and refusing to approach the heat source; in severe cases, open tissue visible beneath lifted scale edges. Burns in CWDs typically result from a basking lamp positioned too close to the branch, an unregulated heat source, or a heat source allowed to shine too intensely on a single localized area. **Why:** contact or radiant heat at a level the dragon cannot self-regulate away from fast enough. Reptiles have a slower pain response than mammals; a CWD resting below an unregulated lamp can sustain a significant burn before the discomfort prompts movement. **What to do:** correct the heat source, thermostat, and lamp distance immediately; move the animal to a clean thermostatted enclosure while healing; keep burned areas clean and dry with no topical applications unless directed by a vet. **When to call a vet:** any burn with open tissue, spreading discoloration, or a wound that shows no improvement in 48 hours. Burns in reptiles become infected readily and typically require antibiotic support to heal cleanly.

Stomatitis (mouth rot)

What you see: swelling around the jaw and lips; the dragon frequently wiping or scraping the mouth on decor or enclosure surfaces; reddened or inflamed gum tissue visible when the mouth opens; in moderate cases, a yellowish, caseous discharge at the mouth margins; in advanced cases, jaw tissue that appears darkened or necrotic. **Why:** bacterial infection in mouth tissue, typically initiated by a cricket bite, a snout abrasion, or immune suppression from chronic environmental stress. CWDs are somewhat more susceptible than other lizards because their active movement and tendency toward surface contact means they accumulate more minor oral injuries. **What to do:** isolate the animal; gently clean accessible areas with dilute chlorhexidine solution on a cotton swab; identify and address the environmental stressor. **When to call a vet:** within two to three days of first visible symptoms — stomatitis spreads to bone and jaw tissue with surprising speed and virtually always requires prescription antibiotic treatment to resolve.

Egg-binding (dystocia) in females

What you see: a female who is visibly swollen in the lower abdomen; digging persistently in the enclosure substrate without depositing eggs; restlessness or lethargy; loss of appetite; possible visible straining. Female CWDs will produce infertile clutches even without male contact. **Why:** eggs cannot be passed because there is no appropriate laying site, because an egg is malformed or positioned incorrectly, or because calcium deficiency is affecting the muscle contractions needed for oviposition. **What to do:** any female CWD enclosure should permanently include a large, deep laying container — a plastic bin roughly 12" × 12" × 12" filled with damp organic topsoil or coir, with an entry hole cut in the side. Introduce it as a permanent fixture rather than waiting until the female looks gravid. Warm soaks and gentle additional hydration may provide relief in mild early cases. **When to call a vet:** any female who has been visibly straining or digging repeatedly for more than 12–24 hours without depositing eggs needs

same-day veterinary assessment. Untreated dystocia becomes fatal.

Bacterial illness from water quality failure

What you see: sudden loss of appetite in an otherwise active animal; lethargy; swelling around the vent or lower abdomen; stool with blood or mucus; a dragon who was using the water feature regularly suddenly avoiding it entirely. Bacterial illness from unclean water develops quickly because CWDs spend significant time in a body of water that is also their primary defecation site.

Why: high bacterial load in the water feature — *Aeromonas*, *Pseudomonas*, and other opportunistic bacteria bloom rapidly in warm, waste-laden water. **What to do:** perform a complete water change and container scrub immediately; increase water change frequency going forward; isolate the animal from any other reptiles in the household. **When to call a vet:** for any systemic signs — lethargy, vent abnormality, bloody stool, visible swelling — that do not resolve within 24–48 hours of a full water quality correction. Water-borne bacterial infections in reptiles almost always require prescription antibiotic treatment.

Quick reference

What you see	Likely cause	What to do	Vet urgency
Raw, bleeding snout tip	Snout rubbing / rostral abrasion	Cover three walls; reduce interior reflections; clean wound with dilute chlorhexidine	If infected, deep, or worsening: within a few days
Soft jaw, limb trembling, bowing	MBD — calcium / D3 / UVB deficit	Correct supplements and UVB immediately	Within days; sooner if severe
Audible breathing, nasal mucus, open mouth	Respiratory infection	Improve ventilation; maintain overnight temperature above 65°F	Within 24–48 hours
Weight loss + unusual stool over weeks	Internal parasites	Fecal exam with reptile vet; targeted treatment	Within a week
Tail separated from body	Autotomy	Paper towel enclosure; keep stump clean and dry	If stump shows infection
Blistered or lifting scales	Thermal burn	Fix heat source immediately; keep wound dry	Open tissue: same day
Mouth swelling, discharge	Stomatitis	Clean with chlorhexidine; isolate	Within 2–3 days
Female straining and digging, no eggs	Dystocia	Warm soak; provide lay box	Same day if straining continues
Sudden lethargy, vent swelling, bloody stool	Bacterial water illness	Full water change and scrub; isolate	Within 24–48 hours if systemic

SECTION 10

Handling & Taming

Chinese water dragons are fast, agile, and built by evolution to flee from anything that approaches from above. A new CWD — especially a young one — may sprint the full length of the enclosure, ricochet off every surface, and launch into the water feature the moment a hand enters. This is not aggression. It is a flight response from an animal who does not yet know whether you are a predator, running on instincts sharpened over millions of years. With consistent, calm, short sessions that always end on the dragon's terms, most CWDs become remarkably personable within two to four weeks. Many adults will come to the front of the enclosure and step voluntarily onto an offered hand before the door is fully open. That shift from panic to trust is one of the most rewarding experiences in working with this species, and it is earned through patience rather than force.

Why approach angle matters

Never reach from above. The motion of a hand descending from overhead is a precise replication of the attack trajectory of a bird of prey — the CWD's primary natural predator. Even a fully socialized adult may flinch from an over-the-top reach, and a new animal will sprint. Front-opening enclosures exist to eliminate this problem entirely. Open the front panels, let your hand enter at mid-level from the side, and move slowly.

Support the full body with both hands. A CWD at 24–36 inches of total length has a lot of tail that will flail if the animal is startled, and a lot of limbs that will push off with genuine force. Support from chest to hip; let the tail drape naturally over your arm or hand. Do not grip or restrain the tail — a dragon whose tail is held will struggle harder and is at higher risk of dropping it under extreme stress.

Taming timeline

Days 1–5: the enclosure only. No handling, no reaching in. Open and close the front panels slowly during food and water checks. Let the animal map his enclosure without interruption.

Days 5–10: begin sitting beside the enclosure at the same time each day, especially around the morning basking window. Speak at normal conversational volume. No tapping the glass. The goal is for your presence, voice, and size to become background context rather than an active threat stimulus.

Days 8–14: open the front panels and allow your hand to rest flat and still on the land-side substrate, below and to the side of the dragon's position. Do not move toward him. A CWD who approaches your hand voluntarily and investigates with his tongue is more socialized the following day than one who was physically retrieved and held still for five minutes. Voluntary investigation is the milestone to wait for.

Day 14 onward: brief holding sessions of three to five minutes, extended gradually as the dragon relaxes. Every session ends when he begins showing stress signals — not after. Building trust means ending sessions early enough that he consistently experiences them as neutral or positive.

Reading stress signals and setting limits

A CWD preparing to bolt will flatten slightly, orient toward an escape route, and widen the eyes. An actively stressed dragon during handling will push off hard with all four feet, reverse direction repeatedly, and whip the tail. End the session and return him at the first clear signal, not the third. A dragon who defecates during handling is telling you the session exceeded his stress threshold significantly — shorten the next several sessions and rebuild from a shorter baseline.

Children and families

CWDs are appropriate animals for family homes when adults are present and actively supervising. Children should handle seated on the floor so a sudden exit by the dragon goes nowhere dangerous. Teach children to present the hand from the side and below,

to move slowly, and to let the dragon choose to step on rather than being grabbed. A dragon who walks onto a child's arm because he chose to is demonstrating the kind of earned trust that builds over weeks of consistent, respectful handling — and it is recognizable as such even to young children when framed that way.

SECTION 11

Routine Care Calendar

How often	What to do
Daily	Full water change if unfiltered; or remove visible waste and check water clarity if filtered
Daily	Confirm basking-spot temperature and cool-end temperature with probe thermometers
Daily	Check hygrometer; mist morning and evening
Daily	Observe the dragon at basking time: posture, eye clarity, body condition, skin appearance
Daily	Offer food on the appropriate schedule for the dragon's life stage; remove uneaten live feeders within 30 minutes
Daily	Spot-clean land substrate — remove any visible feces or urates
Daily	Confirm the UVB and basking lamps came on and off on the correct photoperiod
Twice weekly	50% water change with temperature-matched, conditioned water; wipe accessible water feature surfaces
Weekly	Full water dish scrub if separate from the main feature; replace water
Weekly	Inspect all toes and the tail tip for retained shed, especially following a shedding event
Weekly	Audit calcium supplement supply; top up feeder gut-load provisions
Weekly	Full body condition check: muscle tone, scale quality, snout tip, vent region
Weekly	Inspect opaque background panels and branch anchors for stability
Monthly	Full water feature change and container scrub with reptile-safe disinfectant; rinse thoroughly; refill with conditioned water
Monthly	Deep enclosure clean — remove decor, wipe all surfaces with reptile-safe disinfectant, refresh top inch of land substrate
Monthly	Wash all decor and climbing furniture in hot water; dry fully before returning
Monthly	Review supplement schedule; photograph the dragon from above for a body condition baseline to compare over time
Every 6 months	Audit the thermal gradient with fresh probe thermometer batteries; confirm IR gun calibration against a known surface
Every 12 months	Replace the UVB tube on the calendar regardless of visible output; UV degrades well before visible light does
Annually	Exotics reptile vet wellness exam including fecal exam; twice annually for laying females or animals over 10 years old

SECTION 12

FAQ

What do Chinese water dragons eat?

Chinese water dragons are omnivores whose diet divides roughly into 70% insects, 20% leafy greens and vegetables, and 10% occasional treat items. The primary insect feeders are dubia roaches and crickets — both should be gut-loaded on leafy greens, squash, and a quality dry diet for at least 24 hours before offering. Hornworms and silkworms make excellent occasional protein additions for variety and hydration. The vegetable portion should emphasize low-oxalate, calcium-rich greens: collard greens, mustard greens, and pesticide-free dandelion greens are the most reliable choices, with bell pepper and squash as regular additions. Occasional adult treats include small feeder fish introduced into the water feature and very infrequently a small pinky mouse; small amounts of mango or papaya work well as an appetite stimulator. Every insect feeding for juveniles should be dusted with calcium powder without D3; adults receive dusting on alternating feedings. A calcium-with-D3 supplement runs twice monthly and a reptile multivitamin once monthly.

Do Chinese water dragons need water in their enclosure?

Yes — not a water dish, but a real water feature deep enough for full submersion. Chinese water dragons are semi-aquatic animals whose biology is built around daily access to standing or flowing water. They use full submersion for stress relief, thermoregulation, skin hydration, drinking, and shedding support; in the wild, their primary escape response when threatened is to drop directly into the nearest stream. The minimum feature for an adult is 6–8 inches deep with a footprint of at least 16" × 16" — large enough to fully submerge and turn around. The water feature also does atmospheric work inside the enclosure: a body of water at 76–80°F in a warm enclosure generates evaporation that significantly contributes to the 70–80% ambient humidity the species requires. Attempting to keep a CWD in a setup with only a drinking bowl is one of the most common and most consequential setup failures for this species.

How big do Chinese water dragons get?

Adult Chinese water dragons reach 24–36 inches in total length from snout to tail tip, with the tail accounting for roughly 60–70% of that measurement — so the actual body from nose to vent on a large adult is 8–12 inches, but the overall animal is substantial and visually striking. Males grow larger and more muscular than females and develop more prominent dorsal crests along the spine and neck. The minimum enclosure for a single adult is 48 inches long and 48 inches tall, reflecting the animal's combined need for ground territory, a water feature, and climbing height. Most CWDs reach adult size by 18–24 months with good nutrition, though males may continue adding muscle and bulk into their third year.

What temperature do Chinese water dragons need?

The basking spot on the main branch directly under the heat lamp should read 90–95°F on the surface. Warm ambient air temperature at the dragon's level on the warm side should be 80–85°F. The cool end should hold at 75–80°F — warmer than the cool end of most reptile enclosures, reflecting the tropical origin of this species. Overnight, when the overhead heat is off, the enclosure can drop to 70–75°F, but must never fall below 65°F under any circumstances. A drop below 65°F is a respiratory infection and immune suppression event. All heat sources must be run through a quality thermostat; an unregulated heat lamp positioned above a basking branch is a burn risk for an animal resting in the lamp's direct field.

Why does my water dragon rub its nose on the glass?

Your dragon is rubbing his nose on the glass because he cannot perceive a transparent barrier as a solid wall. When he looks through the glass, he sees the room beyond and tries to walk into it. When he sees his own reflection, he interprets it as a rival and charges it. Both of these instincts produce the same result: repeated face-to-glass contact called snout rubbing, which causes rostral abrasions — raw, bleeding wounds at the snout tip — that become infected rapidly and can permanently scar an otherwise

healthy animal. The solution is to cover all three non-front walls with opaque material before the dragon enters the enclosure for the first time, reduce or eliminate reflective surfaces inside the enclosure, and use dense plant coverage to break the dragon's sightline to the front glass. If snout rubbing is already occurring and abrasions are present, clean the wound gently with dilute chlorhexidine and see a vet if the tissue is deep, actively bleeding, or showing signs of infection.

Do Chinese water dragons like to be handled?

Yes, once trust is built — and building trust requires patience rather than force. New and juvenile CWDs are typically flight-prone and will sprint away from any reaching hand at first. With calm, short daily sessions that always end before the dragon reaches active stress, most CWDs become genuinely relaxed and personable within two to four weeks, and adults who have been well-socialized will voluntarily approach and step onto their keeper's hand. The non-negotiable practices are: approach always from the side rather than from above, support the full body with both hands, keep early sessions to three to five minutes, and return the dragon at the first clear stress signal rather than pushing through it. Families with children can absolutely work with a socialized CWD with adult supervision and proper seated handling technique.

How long do Chinese water dragons live?

A well-kept Chinese water dragon can live 10–15 years, with animals at the upper end of that range being a realistic expectation rather than an exceptional outcome for a keeper who gets the basics right from the beginning. The factors that most reliably determine where on that range an individual lands are: a correct thermal gradient and adequate UVB from day one, a water feature maintained to consistently high water-quality standards, a proper calcium supplementation schedule, and access to an exotic animal veterinarian for annual wellness checks that catch developing issues before they become entrenched problems. Animals who spend their early years in chronically suboptimal setups — low humidity, no water feature, inadequate UVB — accumulate damage that shortens their lifespan significantly regardless of how much subsequent care improves.

What humidity do Chinese water dragons need?

Chinese water dragons need ambient enclosure humidity of 70–80%, consistently. This is tropical rainforest humidity, not a modest bump from a typical room environment — it requires active management. Below 60%, CWDs develop dysecdysis (failed shedding), chronic skin problems, and dehydration symptoms despite having water available. The tools for maintaining this level work in combination: a large water feature at 76–80°F provides passive evaporation; dense live plant coverage buffers humidity between misting sessions; a semi-sealed or fully-sealed enclosure with targeted ventilation retains what the water feature and plants generate; an automatic misting system running twice daily tops up what evaporates. Monitor with a digital hygrometer placed at mid-enclosure height away from the water feature surface — a reading taken directly above the water will be misleadingly high. If ambient humidity consistently falls below 65%, add plant coverage and reduce ventilation slightly before increasing misting frequency.

Do Chinese water dragons need UVB?

Yes, absolutely, and at a higher level than most commonly kept lizard species. Chinese water dragons are classified as Ferguson Zone 3 lizards, meaning they are high-UVB users that bask in direct or near-direct sunlight for significant portions of the day in their native rainforest. The correct product is a T5 HO 6% or 10% UVB fluorescent tube positioned over the basking branch at the manufacturer's recommended distance for the specific tube. Without adequate UVB, a CWD cannot synthesize D3 through the skin — the primary mechanism that allows calcium to be absorbed from the gut — and will develop metabolic bone disease regardless of how conscientiously calcium powder is applied to their food. The UVB lamp runs on a 12-hour photoperiod and must be replaced every 12 months on a calendar date, even when it still visibly produces light. UV output degrades well before the tube stops glowing, and a two-year-old T5 HO that appears fine may be delivering a small fraction of its original UV index.

Can two Chinese water dragons live together?

Not safely for beginners, and with very limited exceptions in any setting. Chinese water dragons are solitary in the wild and do not benefit from reptile companionship. Two males housed together will fight seriously and quickly — territorial disputes between

adult male CWDs involve deep lacerations, eye injuries, and tail damage that require veterinary care. Two females may avoid dramatic combat but will almost always establish a dominant-subordinate hierarchy in which the subordinate is progressively outcompeted for basking access, food, and water use, showing weight loss and immune decline over weeks without any obvious fighting to alert the keeper. The one partial exception is a proven, compatible male-female pair in an enclosure large enough that the female can genuinely avoid the male when not receptive — minimum 6 feet long, 3 feet wide, 6 feet tall — with multiple basking sites and dense enough planting that the two animals are not in constant visual contact. Even this arrangement requires ongoing monitoring and a clear plan for separation if stress signs emerge. The standard for this species is one CWD per enclosure.

SECTION 13

Every Purchase Gives Back

Before we earn a dime, **10% of every purchase at Walnut Creek Supply goes to no-kill animal shelters across the country.** Not at checkout, not as an optional donation — it comes off the top of every order, every day, because we believe responsible pet ownership and community care are inseparable from each other.

That matters a little specifically for Chinese water dragon keepers. CWDs are one of the reptile species most commonly surrendered to rescues — often because a stunning animal was sold with a water dish, a bare glass tank, and no guidance about snout rubbing, humidity, or water features. If you've read this guide and are building the setup it describes, you're the keeper this animal needs. And if you're in a position to adopt rather than shop — rescues in your region have CWDs waiting for someone who knows what they're doing.

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