Pacman Frog / Horned Frog Care Guide

Ceratophrys spp.

An inactive ambush predator still needs space, cover, deep soil, thermal choice and clean water. These targets center on Ceratophrys cranwelli; other species and hybrids may need adjustments, and albino animals require especially conservative light exposure.

Species Profile

Common name: Pacman Frog / Horned Frog

Scientific name: *Ceratophrys spp.*

Adult size: Males about 3-4 in (8-10 cm), females often 4-6 in (10-15 cm) snout-to-vent; species varies

Average lifespan: 8-15 years

Native range: South America; targets here center on C. cranwelli from the seasonal Chaco

Habitat and activity: Mostly nocturnal, terrestrial and burrowing ambush predator

Diet: Earthworms and varied cultured insects; rodents are not staples

Care difficulty: Intermediate

Shopping List

- Secure enclosure at least 24 × 18 × 18 in (61 × 46 × 46 cm; L × W × H) for one adult; see Housing for exceptions and group arrangements.
- Digital thermometers for different zones; a suitable hygrometer; timer for a consistent day/night cycle.
- Species-appropriate substrate and multiple stable hides or covered retreats.
- Reliable supply of the staple foods described below, clean feeding tools and a transport container.
- Appropriate overhead heat source if required, controlled by a compatible thermostat; infrared thermometer for surfaces.
- Appropriate visible lighting and, where recommended below, a linear UVB fixture with measured shade and exposure zones.
- Amphibian-safe conditioner that treats both chlorine and chloramine, powder-free disposable gloves, and an amphibian-appropriate supplement.

Housing

Our recommended starting adult enclosure is 24 × 18 × 18 in (61 × 46 × 46 cm; L × W × H) for one animal. Larger usable space is encouraged. These dimensions are a husbandry recommendation, not a species-specific experimentally proven threshold.

Provide multiple hides across the warm-to-cool and moist-to-drier gradient, covered travel routes and species-appropriate burrowing or low climbing structure. Fix heavy decor to the floor before adding loose substrate so digging cannot undermine it.

Juveniles may use a furnished adult enclosure when food intake, hydration and waste can be monitored. A temporary grow-out enclosure should still offer choice and cover. Quarantine newcomers separately with dedicated tools and a substrate that permits health monitoring; arrange veterinary assessment for unknown-origin animals.

Lighting & UVB

Provide roughly 10-12 hours of visible daylight followed by darkness. A measured UV Index (UVI) around 0.3-0.7 at the most exposed usable site, declining to near zero inside retreats, is our conservative starting recommendation. Species-specific optimal UV doses are not established for these frogs; low exposure is optional only when substantial shade and safe temperatures can be maintained.

Measure exposure at the animal's back height with an appropriate UVI meter, such as a Solarmeter 6.5. Lamp percentage, wattage and a fixed distance alone do not establish exposure: reflectors, mesh, perch height, plant growth and lamp age change output. Keep glass/plastic out of the UV path, follow fixture safety instructions and provide complete shade. Replace or reassess lamps according to measured output and manufacturer guidance.

For albino or other light-sensitive animals, use the low end of the exposure range or lower after specialist advice, add dense shade and watch for light avoidance or eye irritation. Never increase lamp strength to compensate for uncertainty.

Heating & Temperature

- Warm retreat / local air: 80-82°F (27-28°C).
- Cool-zone air: 72-76°F (22-24°C).
- Nighttime air: 68-75°F (20-24°C) for healthy established animals.

Create the gradient on one side rather than heating every hide to the same temperature. Use a compatible thermostat on each heat source; a manual lamp dimmer does not replace thermostatic protection. Secure the probe and verify temperatures independently: probe thermometers measure air/retreat temperature, while an infrared thermometer measures exposed surfaces.

Use appropriately guarded overhead warmth when needed. Keep animals clear of hot fixtures, avoid heat rocks, and switch visible lights off at night. Night heat is needed only when the room falls below the appropriate range; use a thermostat-controlled lightless source if necessary.

Humidity & Ventilation

60-80% with damp lower soil, airflow and no permanent swamp. Treat readings as a starting pattern rather than a number to chase regardless of substrate, airflow or animal behavior.

Measure humidity in a representative occupied zone, away from a freshly sprayed surface. Provide sheltered moisture choices while retaining airflow. Persistent condensation, sour odor, flooded soil or surfaces that never dry indicate a setup problem. Ventilation and hydration must be adjusted together rather than simply sealing all vents.

Water & Hydration

Use clean water conditioned for both chlorine and chloramine, or an appropriate mineral-balanced amphibian-safe supply. Standing tap water does not reliably remove chloramine. Unremineralized distilled/RO water should not be the routine soaking or drinking supply; mineral-free misting systems require attention to the animal's full water exposure.

Refresh any dish daily and immediately after contamination. Provide easy exits and water shallow enough for the animal to rest with its head above the surface. Keep the substrate free of stagnant standing water.

Substrate

Substrate is one of the most important parts of Pacman frog care because burrowing is a core natural behavior. Adults should have at least 4-6" of soft, diggable substrate, with deeper areas for large females. A naturalistic soil mix made from fertilizer- and pesticide-free organic topsoil with coco coir and a modest amount of washed play sand works well. Cover part of the surface with clean hardwood leaf litter.

Coconut fiber by itself can be used temporarily, but a soil-based mix provides better structure and moisture gradients for long-term housing. Avoid chunky coco bark/orchid bark, gravel, pebbles, calcium sand, walnut shell, wood shavings, cedar, pine, reptile carpet, and other abrasive or easily swallowed materials.

Loose sphagnum moss can be useful in a limited humid area, but do not use long strands as the main feeding surface because a lunging frog may swallow them with prey. For small juveniles or frogs that consistently grab mouthfuls of substrate, offer food from tongs or a smooth feeding dish/tile while still allowing the animal to live on an appropriate burrowing substrate.

Food & Feeding

Pacman frogs are generalist carnivores and should receive a varied diet rather than being raised on one feeder. Excellent staples include appropriately sized earthworms/nightcrawlers, dubia roaches, crickets, silkworms, and other nutritious gut-loaded invertebrates. Hornworms can provide variety and hydration but should not be the only feeder. Use captive-produced feeders rather than wild insects because of pesticide and parasite risk.

Prey size: do not offer a rigid prey item wider than the frog's head. Long, soft prey such as earthworms can be longer because they fold easily. Remove hard or sharp feeder parts when needed and never force oversized food into the mouth.

Juveniles: offer small meals every 1-2 days while growing. Subadults: usually every 2-4 days.

Adults: a moderate meal about every 5-7 days is a reasonable starting point, then adjust to body condition and individual metabolism.

Do not power-feed simply because the frog will continue striking. A Pacman frog should be robust and rounded, but obesity is a genuine disease risk. Frequent rodents and other very energy-dense vertebrate prey can drive rapid weight gain and should not be a staple. If whole vertebrate prey is used at all, use appropriately sized frozen/thawed prey only as an occasional item; never offer a live rodent that can injure the frog.

Avoid routine feeder fish, especially goldfish or other thiaminase-rich fish, and avoid wild vertebrates.

Do not hand-feed with fingers: the feeding response is fast, and Ceratophrys have unusually strong jaws for frogs.

Supplements

Use an amphibian-appropriate calcium/multivitamin program containing suitable preformed vitamin A, following the product’s labeled schedule and specialist guidance. Many feeder insects are calcium-poor; varied prey alone does not guarantee a balanced captive diet.

Coordinate calcium, D3, vitamin A and UVB rather than stacking several products. Potency varies between brands, so a universal dose in scoops or days is misleading. Keep supplements fresh, store as directed and do not use high-dose vitamin A to treat suspected deficiency without veterinary assessment.

Decor & Enrichment

A Pacman frog may not climb around like a tree frog, but it still benefits from environmental choice.

Provide deep soil, leaf litter, at least one low hide, broad-leaf plants or artificial foliage, and shaded areas. Keep an open area where the frog can ambush prey without repeatedly striking hard décor.

Enrichment for an ambush predator is subtle: rotate appropriate feeder types, occasionally change the location from which prey is presented, maintain several burrowing spots with slightly different moisture levels, and allow the frog to choose its own ambush site. Avoid constantly digging up or relocating a frog simply to make it "active."

Handling & Behavior

Limit handling to necessary maintenance or health checks. Use clean powder-free disposable gloves moistened with amphibian-safe water and support the whole body. Avoid oils, soaps, lotions and squeezing. A suitable cup is often safer for transfers.

Do not pull a buried frog out merely to make it visible. Pacman frogs can bite firmly; keep fingers clear of the mouth and use blunt feeding tools carefully. Frequent hiding alone is not proof of illness, but hiding plus weight loss or other changes needs assessment.

Cleaning & Routine Maintenance

Daily: check the animal’s access to water/appropriate moisture, temperatures, visible condition and equipment. Remove feces, contaminated material, dead feeders and spoiled food promptly.

Regularly: clean dishes and feeding surfaces, check thermostats and probes, inspect decor stability and maintain ventilation. Bioactive systems still require waste checks, food removal, plant care and drainage maintenance; they are not self-cleaning.

Record appetite, activity, shed history and weight or body condition when safe. Arrange veterinary assessment for unexplained changes. Quarantine new animals with dedicated tools, and disinfect only with a suitable product used at the label dilution/contact time, then rinse and dry as required before return.

Cohabitation

Individual housing is the safest routine default. Shared housing can cause food competition, injury or reproductive pressure even without obvious fighting. Never assume a male/female pair or female group is compatible. Breeding introductions belong in a planned specialist program with separate backup enclosures and individual monitoring. Size differences and predatory behavior can lead to cannibalism; never feed animals together.

Shedding & Seasonal Changes

Skin shedding can be normal, and frogs may eat shed skin. Persistent abnormal skin, wounds, weakness or redness need assessment. Do not peel skin, force a soak or use home treatments on amphibian skin.

Dry or cool conditions can trigger dormancy/estivation-like behavior. Do not deliberately dehydrate or cool a pet to induce it. Prolonged dormancy, weight loss or poor condition requires a husbandry review and amphibian-experienced veterinary advice.

Common Health Concerns

- Poor body condition or feeding decline: check the full gradient, hydration and food quality; arrange assessment for persistent refusal accompanied by weight loss.
- Calcium/vitamin imbalance: weakness, tremors, a soft or misshapen jaw or abnormal limbs require veterinary assessment; extra high-dose supplements are not a substitute for diagnosis.
- Skin, shed or injury problems: repeated retained skin, wounds, swelling or abnormal discoloration deserve prompt attention.
- Respiratory or systemic illness: labored/open-mouth breathing at rest, marked lethargy, loss of balance, persistent diarrhea or rapid deterioration require an experienced exotic veterinarian.
- Abnormal red patches, sores or bloating can indicate serious disease, including bacterial infection; "red leg" is not a reliable home diagnosis. Do not apply reptile creams, oils, honey or undosed medications to the skin.
- Difficulty capturing prey can occur with several conditions, including vitamin A deficiency. Obtain veterinary assessment rather than treating with concentrated vitamin A.
- Obesity, repeated substrate ingestion and overlarge prey are preventable concerns. Feed measured portions, keep safe hydration and heat, and use a clear feeding surface if the frog repeatedly swallows substrate. A persistently bloated or straining frog needs assessment.

RED ROCKS
EXOTIC REPTILES