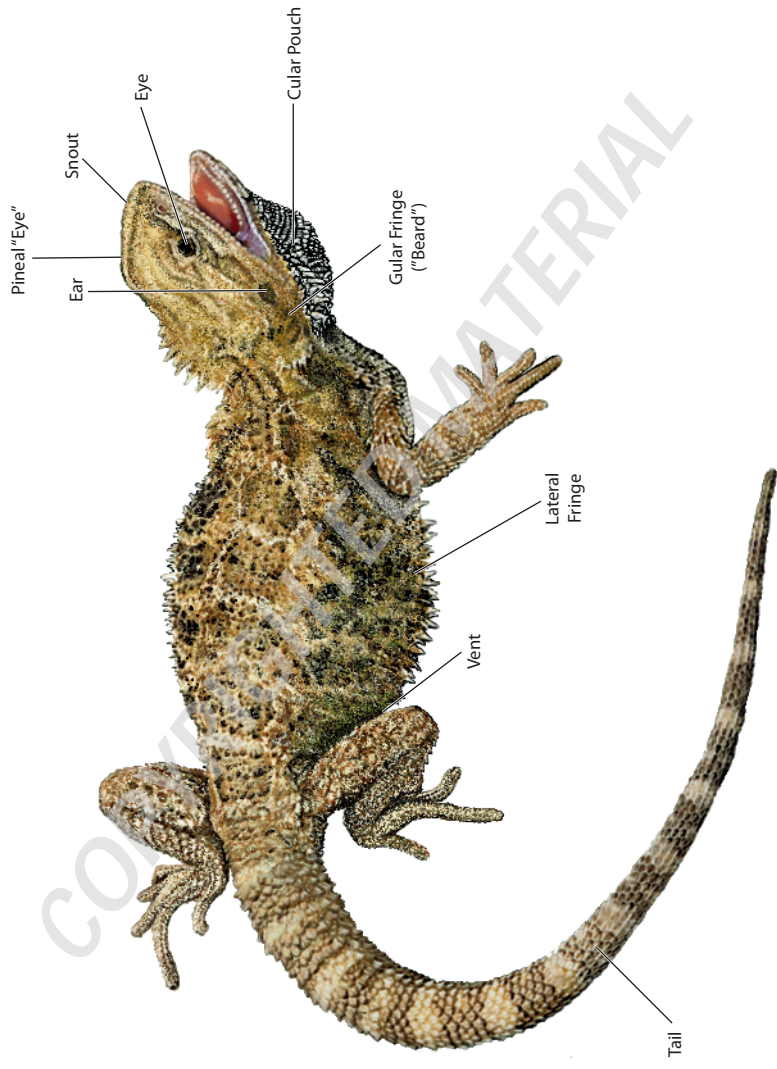


The Bearded Dragon





Chapter 1

What Is the Lizard of Oz?



According to legend, it all began with the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet. Lyman Frank Baum, some eight days short of his 42nd birthday, was sitting with his family and their children's friends on the evening of May 7, 1898, when the wizard of Oz was invented. Baum was entertaining the children with a fairy tale about some fantastic characters when one little girl, beside herself with curiosity, asked, "Oh please, Mr. Baum, where do they live?"

Baum, stuck for an answer, glanced around the room and caught a glimpse of a two drawer filing cabinet over in the corner. The top drawer was labeled A–N and the one down under, O–Z.

But Oz was not only a magical place in Baum's fruitful imagination. It's also the nickname Australians use for their country. They say it comes from a different source, though: When Australians say "Aussie," it sounds like "Ozzie."

Still, Baum's Oz was truly a magical, wonderful place filled with many improbable creatures. And, remarkably, one could say the same thing about Australia. The amazing reptiles (and marsupials) of Australia exist not somewhere over the rainbow, but only down under in Oz.

Bearded dragons are members of the lizard family Agamidae. The lizards in this very diverse family (there are more than 350 species!) are known by a variety of common names, including chisel-toothed lizards, dragons, and pricklenapes. Some have more terrifying but unjustified monikers, such as bloodsuckers and thorny devils (*Moloch horridus*). They are found in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and, of course, in Australia. They have large mouths and a distinctive-shape head that is adorned with spikes and thornlike structures that look like the thorns on a rosebush. Agamids have well-developed limbs and can move

quickly. Unlike some other lizards, most agamids are unable to move their tails independently of their bodies. After looking at various kinds of agamids, you will soon be able to discern the family resemblance among them.

The bearded dragons were originally assigned to the genus *Amphibolurus*, a name derived from the Greek that means “a tail that can be lashed this way and that.” This name refers to a group of agamid lizards with long, thin, whiplike tails. But it soon became evident that beardies were different from the other lizards in this genus. For one thing, they have shorter tails, and they wag them. Plus, there’s the beard. And so, in 1982, an Australian zoologist placed these unique lizards in their own genus, which he named *Pogona*, from the Greek *pogon*, which means “beard.”

By this time, the question on everyone’s mind is: Do these lizards really have beards? The answer is no . . . at least, not hairy ones. No reptiles have hair. Beardies have a highly distensible throat (called the gular pouch), which is covered on the outside by filamentous floppy processes (flappy sprigs of scale tissue that resemble a beard) emanating from their scales. As the pouch is distended, they are able to erect these filaments in such a way that their head looks much bigger than it is. This is a defensive measure that beardies use to scare off predators, and it usually works. The end result to the human eye, however, is what can best be described as a beard.

The Types of Bearded Dragons

There are eight species of bearded dragons in the *Pogona* genus. The name that follows the scientific species is that of the scientist who first identified, described, and named the species, followed by the year of the discovery. As you can see, all but one species were officially described and identified in the 1900s. This shows how little was known about these lizards until recently.

1. Eastern bearded dragon, *Pogona barbata* (Cuvier, 1829)
2. Dwarf bearded dragon, *Pogona minor* (Sternfeld, 1919)
3. Inland or central bearded dragon, *Pogona vitticeps* (Ahl, 1926)
4. Western bearded dragon, *Pogona minima* (Loveridge, 1933)
5. Small-scaled or Drysdale River bearded dragon, *Pogona microlepidota* (Glauert, 1952)
6. Mitchell’s northwest bearded dragon, *Pogona mitchelli* (Badham, 1976)
7. Nullabor bearded dragon, *Pogona nullabor* (Badham, 1976)
8. Rankin’s or Lawson’s bearded dragon, *Pogona henrylawsoni* (Wells and Wellington, 1985)



Many people like lizards because they look like little dinosaurs.

Bearded dragons are found virtually all over Australia except the extreme north, save perhaps for Lawson's bearded dragon. They are also not found in the extreme south. There is also fossil evidence that a species of this group was flourishing on Kangaroo Island some 10,000 to 16,000 years ago, but is now extinct. Although little is certain about the evolutionary relationship of these lizards, *Pogona barbata*, *Pogona henrylawsoni*, *Pogona minima*, and the southwestern population of *Pogona minor* all have a yellow or orange mouth.

Eastern Bearded Dragon (*Pogona barbata*)

The word *barbata* is Latin for “bearded.” This species was the first bearded dragon discovered, and is one of the largest and heaviest of the bearded dragon clan, with early records of animals growing to 1 foot, 8.5 inches in total length, about 1 foot of which is the tail. Lizards nearing 2 feet long have also been recorded. The Eastern bearded dragon is occasionally available in the pet trade in North America from captive-bred colonies.

In the wild, this lizard is found in eastern and southeastern Australia, but not on the Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, or Tasmania. It is semi-arboreal, preferring to perch on low-lying branches, bushes, and rocky outcrops, which are known as “tors” down under in Oz. It can frequently be seen perched on the tops of fence posts as well.



The Eastern bearded dragon is one of the largest and the heaviest of the bearded dragon clan.

It does well in a variety of habitats, ranging from seasonally wet coastal forests to arid, inland scrublands. It feeds on a variety of flowers and tender leaves, and is frequently also observed basking on roads—a risky way to obtain belly heat.

Dwarf Bearded Dragon (*Pogona minor*)

The dwarf bearded dragon is also found in western Australia. However, it is a smaller species than its western bearded dragon cousin, reaching a maximum body length of about 8 to 10 inches. Its range is from the central coast of Western Australia through central Australia and South Australia to the Eyre Peninsula.

Inland or Central Bearded Dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*)

The inland or central bearded dragon is one of the most common species of bearded dragon, both in Australia as well as in the pet trade. This species is the one you would be most likely to find sold by breeders and pet shops, or at swap meets. The majority of this book on the care, keeping, and breeding of bearded dragons refers to this species.

The inland beardie is widely distributed throughout the noncoastal areas of the eastern states through the eastern half of south Australia and north to south-eastern Northern Territory. It is found in a wide range of habitats, from dry

forests and scrublands to the sandy deserts. It is semi-arboreal and perches on roadside fence posts and hills, fallen timber, or trees. It dines on vegetable matter, preferring soft leaves and flowers when available. It is also a voracious insect predator and will quickly consume large numbers of crickets or other live insect foods placed in its enclosure.

A long, large, and heavy-bodied group of these lizards is being bred in Germany and they have earned themselves the nickname German Giants.

Western Bearded Dragon (*Pogona minima*)

The western bearded dragon is found over a vast swath of southwestern Australia in a variety of habitats, ranging from coastal sand dunes to heavily forested areas. Its range is from southwestern Australia far into the arid interior. It is semi-arboreal, and in the wild it perches and basks on fallen trees and rocks. Between October and February, it produces one or possibly two clutches of eggs, numbering from five to fifteen per clutch. During this time, this species is found basking on roads, and a great many get run over by cars.

Some of these dragons may be available overseas as a result of previous smuggling. Western beardies reach a maximum length of about 20 inches, which makes this species among the largest of the beardies and not truly an example of the scientific name *minima*—although the scientist who first named this species may have had other reasons for dubbing it *minima*.



The inland bearded dragon is the species found most often in the pet trade.

Who Was Henry Lawson and Why the Uproar?

Henry Lawson (1867–1922) is a famous Australian poet. The scientists Richard W. Wells and C. Ross Wellington, in naming this bearded dragon after Lawson, decided it was high time he was recognized with an Australian lizard of his own. No, Lawson didn't have a beard, but he did have a mustache.

These Australian herpetologists also named species after corrupt politicians, a less than fitting honor for a reputable reptile—and they once even tried naming a reptile after Darth Vader!

In the rules of scientific nomenclature, anyone who publishes a description of a species that has never been described before in writing can name it after whatever or whomever they please. Aussie herpetologist Ray Hoser once named a new species after his dog. In fact, newly described species are frequently named after dogs, because dogs often figure prominently in an animal's discovery.

Henry Lawson's bearded dragon was first described to science in 1985 by Wells and Wellington, although many Australian herpetologists were previously aware of its existence. It was many years before the name *henrylawsoni* was formally

Drysdale River Bearded Dragon (*Pogona microlepidota*)

This lizard is also known as the small-scaled bearded dragon (*microlepidota* is Greek for “small-scaled”). This species is not available anywhere in the world outside of Australia. This lizard is found mainly within an area comprising the Drysdale River National Park in the northernmost corner of western Australia, and other areas nearby. It is found in open woodland, where a type of grass known as spinifex grows, as well as other low-lying ground shrubbery.

Mitchell's Bearded Dragon (*Pogona mitchelli*)

Mitchell's bearded dragon is found in northwestern Australia and is generally not available in the pet trade. Some scientists consider it a subspecies of *Pogona*

accepted, with rival scientists petitioning the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature to suppress all new names proposed by Wells and Wellington. The petition was rejected, and the commission ruled that each new name would be reviewed case by case, based on the usual rules of priority. Thus, their proposed name for the species was ruled as official.

Later names proposed for the species (*Pogona brevis* and *Pogona rankini*) were rejected. Confusion reigned for many years after these events, though, and *Pogona henrylawsoni* can still be found on dealer and breeder advertisements listed incorrectly as *Pogona brevis* or *Pogona rankini*.

To add greater confusion to the saga of Henry Lawson's bearded dragon, some Australian herpetologists believe that the specimens in the United States (which they have never examined) may be an as-yet-unnamed ninth species of bearded dragon. In theory, at least, *Pogona henrylawsoni* is known to live only in the black-soil areas of Queensland. Is the similar specimen from bordering northwest Australia a different species, or merely an extension of the range of Lawson's bearded dragon?

minor. It is a small species, reaching a maximum body length of about 8 inches. Its range is from the lower Northern Territory to northwestern Western Australia, and it is found in dry woodlands and scrubland.

Nullabor Bearded Dragon (*Pogona nullabor*)

This lizard is found in the south central and southwest of Australia, principally on the Nullabor Plain. On the coast, it is found on steep cliffs and near caves. It differs from *Pogona barbata* in that this beardie has white bands across the back and tail, which some breeders find desirable. The Nullabor bearded dragon reaches a maximum body length of about 8 to 10 inches and has the smallest geographic range of any species of bearded dragon.

Lawson's Bearded Dragon (*Pogona henrylawsoni*)

Lawson's bearded dragon is also known by two other common names: Rankin's dragon and black-soil dragon. It is different from all other members of the genus *Pogona* in one distinctive way: It is almost clean-shaven! Lawson's dragon has practically no "beard," so it cannot properly be called a bearded dragon, although it is similar to beardies in every other respect.

Lawson's bearded dragon is found throughout the black-soil plains of central Queensland and has also been observed on similar terrain in nearby border areas of the Northern Territory. To escape predation in the wild, this lizard has been seen scuttling quickly into and between cracks in the soil.

Purebred Lawson's dragons are well suited for hobbyists who lack the space for larger species. Lawson's average about 10 inches long, including the tail. Breeders advise they have successfully mated and bred pairs in a 20-gallon aquarium, while larger species, such as the inland beardie, do best in a 125-gallon, 6-foot-long aquarium.

Unfortunately, there are very few breeding stocks of Lawson's bearded dragon in the United States, and they may be related. If so, this could ultimately make for a poor genetic outcome in future breeding attempts. These small stocks originated in Germany in 1984 and were probably derived from smuggled specimens of this (at the time) unnamed species. Because it is impossible to legally get any new animals from Australia, this species may have a poor outlook as far as the hobbyist is concerned. However, several Henry Lawson's bearded dragon breeders in the United States have so far had no problems with their purebred stock.



Lawson's bearded dragons are smaller than most other species and have almost no beard.

Henry's Hybrids

To confound matters even more, Henry Lawson's dragons may hybridize with *Pogona vitticeps*, both in the wild as well as deliberately or inadvertently in captivity. The results of such cross-matings are amusingly called "vittikins." Body size, head shape, color, tail length, and the extent of the beard growth are all altered in such hybrid crosses. Some of the offspring look like inlands and others look like Lawson's. In the size department, hybrids are larger than Lawson's but smaller than inland beardies, with total lengths averaging 13 to 15 inches.

Breeders of Lawson's bearded dragons are very much opposed to cross-breeding them with inland bearded dragons, and argue that there is no reason to do so. According to one Lawson's breeder, Jon Klarsfeld, such cross-breeding could destroy the Lawson's bearded dragon gene pool, and buyers of bearded dragons will never really know what species they are getting. Lawson's and inland dragons are different genetically, and cross-breeding can be disastrous for a species.