

Shaw's Jirds

What they are

The Shaw's Jird (*Meriones Shawi*) is about the same size as a rat and looks like a giant version of the Mongolian Gerbil. Indeed, the two species are closely related. They both belong to the same branch of the gerbil family, the jirds. The Mongolian Gerbil is in fact not a true gerbil at all but a jird. Its proper name is the Clawed Jird (*Meriones Unguiculatus*).

The Shaw's Jird originates from the arid areas of North Africa and the Middle East. It has been used extensively in research laboratories but has only been kept as a pet relatively recently. Up to about 10 years ago, a similar species, the Libyan Jird, was kept as a pet but the Shaw's Jird has been found to be friendlier and to make the better pet.



Shaw's Jirds as pets

Shaw's Jirds make wonderful pets. They have the same innate friendliness and natural curiosity as their Mongolian cousins. They rarely bite and enjoy being handled. Being that much bigger, they are easier to cuddle. They are also extremely intelligent. I let mine out for a run around my flat and have no trouble recapturing them. I just call them and they come to me and let me pick them up. I have also trained them to go to the toilet on a piece of newspaper placed on the floor for this purpose. The only problem with giving them the freedom of the room is that being rodents they will gnaw at everything. Shaw's Jirds have bigger teeth than Mongolian Gerbils and are able to cause more damage. It is important to make sure that all electric cables are beyond their reach. In my case, the telephone was a perennial problem. After being cut off the phone three times by probing gnashers, I had to get BT to come and move the plug so it was four feet up the wall. Shaw's Jirds seem particularly partial to ripping up wallpaper and pulling chunks out of the carpet.

Pet jirds should be kept as a pair in the case of males or singly in the case of females. (See the section on breeding below for an explanation of this).

Housing

The Shaw's housing requirements are similar to the Mongolian's. I find that a 30" aquarium provides adequate accommodation for a pair. As with my Mongolian Gerbils, I make permanent tunnels at the bottom of the tanks with clay pipes, large jars and other ceramic containers, and I cover this with a deep layer of wood chips. Whilst female Shaw's invariably make use of the pipes for their sleeping quarters, males often choose to remain on the surface whilst they sleep. This may be because the males prefer to sleep stretched out on their backs with all four paws in the air!. This is just one of the differences between male and female which contributes to problems with compatibility. (See the section on breeding below for more on this).

Diet

Like Mongolian Gerbils, the basic diet of the Shaw's Jird is a mixture of seeds and grains. However, they are more omnivorous and relish variety. Unlike Mongolians they enjoy all types of fruit and vegetables. They also need a small amount of meat. Some breeders give them tinned cat food. I give mine mealworms twice a week as I find this less messy.

Breeding

If you just want to keep Shaw's Jird as pets and do not wish to breed from them, then you should choose either two males or a SINGLE female. A pair of males will live happily together and as with Mongolian Gerbils appear to become very attached to their partners. Females, on the other hand, are much more aggressive towards other jirds. (They are fine with people). If they have been introduced at an early age, two females may live together amicably for a while but they are likely to start to fight as they get older. Unfortunately, the same is true of a mixed sex pair and this makes breeding Shaw's Jird very difficult. Female Shaw's are dominant. They are very territorial and will monopolise the bed, bedding and food. No matter how much food and bedding is put into the cage, the female will take it all mouthful by mouthful and store it in her bedroom. Should the male be foolish enough to try and enter this sacred domain or to impede the female in any way, the female will grab his tail in her mouth and pull hard. If she grabs the tip of the tail, then she may pull it off. More likely she will inflict a nasty bite. As the harassment continues, both male and female will begin to show signs of stress. Their noses may bleed and a blood-coloured discharge may come from their eyes. Both will develop scabs from bites on their tails and feet. As soon as the lid is taken off the cage, the male may try to run away. Unlike incompatible Mongolian Gerbils, I have never known Shaw's Jird to engage in mortal combat. Nevertheless, there usually comes a point when for the health of both they have to be separated.

How then is it possible to breed from Shaw's Jird? Most of the ones I have bred have been from young females. Females mature early and if they are paired with an older male are likely to mate when they are around ten weeks old. One or possibly two litters may be successfully raised before the pair have to be separated. With older females living alone, it is a case of putting the male in her cage for an hour or so when she is on heat. This is quite easy to detect. If the male is held close to the female's cage so the pair can smell one another, the female will wag her tail vigorously if she is on heat. If she is not on heat, then she will squeak loudly and attempt to attack the male.

The gestation period for Shaw's Jird would appear to be similar to Mongolian Gerbils, 24-26 days. However, young Shaw's develop faster. By the time they are 16 days old their eyes are wide open, they are fully mobile and they are eating solid food voraciously (unlike Mongolians who are only taking their first tentative nibbles at this stage). From this time on they grow incredibly quickly. However, their mother continues to keep a watchful eye on them and it is not uncommon to see her struggling to pick them up in her mouth and return them to the nest until they are about four weeks old. Like Mongolians, Female Shaw's come on heat a few hours after giving birth. If a successful mating takes place, then a new litter will be born when the previous one is only just over three weeks old. Though this is not desirable, Mongolian Gerbils seem to be able to cope with this and successfully rear the new litter. Shaw's Jird, don't and any litter born as a result of a breed back in this way is likely to be neglected and die.

Further reading

Information about Shaw's Jird is extremely difficult to find. I have only come across the odd paragraph about them in books on gerbils and other rodents. However, if you are seriously thinking about acquiring a breeding pair then you might like to take note of the following:

“The world's greatest mammalian lover is Shaw's Jird of North Africa, which is frequently used as an experimental laboratory animal. One 60g male was observed to mate 224 times in 2 hours!”

(Wood, G L The Guinness book of animal facts and feats 3rd edition Guinness Superlatives. 1982)

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Original article by Sue Green

Distributed by The National Gerbil Society, 373 Lynmouth Ave, Morden, Surrey, SM4 4RY

- jackie@gerbils.co.uk - www.gerbils.co.uk