

Persian Jirds

Persian Jirds (*Meriones persicus*) are a truly beautiful gerbil, very inquisitive and naturally tame animals. They do not bite, seem unafraid of humans and can be handled quite easily.

They are large. Although not as well built as a Shaw's Jird, they are a little longer, about 6" (155mm), with a tail that is about 15% longer than the body. Their coloration is the normal agouti colour that anyone familiar with gerbils or jirds will know well. The belly is a particularly brilliant white. The long tail has a beautiful brush that extends along nearly a third of its length.



They come from many parts of central Asia including Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and many parts of ex-Soviet central Asia such as Turkmenistan and Azerbaidjan. In some regions they occupy flat semi-deserts, but their favourite habitat is dry rocky hillsides with little vegetation. They prefer sloping ground and will occupy the rock strewn mountain gorges cut by seasonal streams and rivers. Although they will dig burrows, these are fairly simple affairs by gerbil standards and have few entrances. Instead of burrows, Persian Jirds will often simply shelter under overhanging rocks. The burrows are usually well spaced out. Like many of the larger *Meriones* species they live in loose communities rather than the close knit colonies that the more familiar Mongolian Gerbil creates. Persian Jirds are also not shy of taking advantage of human habitation. They often live under walls, on the banks of irrigation ditches and the margins of areas of cultivation. They will take advantage of ruined buildings as a place of shelter.

In the wild their diet mainly consists of dry plant material and cereals. But they are particularly partial to fresh vegetables. They are known to also eat insects and small animals. Although nocturnal, Persian Jirds are active during the day. Like Mongolian Gerbils they will quickly wake to investigate any disturbance.

In the regions where they live the climate is dry. The temperature can vary a lot also. The very clear skies mean that summer mean daytime temperatures are about 25C but winter temperatures can fall well below freezing. As Persian Jirds can live at fairly high altitudes, 6000 feet (2000m) or more, temperatures in winter at night must get very low.

Persian Jirds normally have two litters a year, one in the Spring, and one in Autumn. In some regions like Azerbaidjan they have a third litter in Winter. The average size of litters is seven. The gestation period of Persian jirds is about 28 days. In captivity litters are normally produced between May and September, a mother will make a nest for her litter and will keep other Jirds away. They do a good job of caring for their pups and normally all survive. Being large animals they need a lot of space. They will not even breed unless they have five square feet of space (half a square metre). In such a tank you can keep a male and two females. The females will make separate nests and both will usually breed successfully. Persian Jirds rarely if ever fight, but a female jird will aggressively defend her litter from other jirds. In captivity they have been known to live for six or seven years.

They love to climb and jump. They are very agile. One of the reasons they need space is that they do not jump upwards, but leap from rock to rock etc. They like to have a nest box, but give them several as they may fill the first one up with hoarded food! In captivity it is fairly easy to reproduce their natural diet with normal hamster mix, mealworms and/or dry cat food.

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