



Department of Planning and Natural Resources

Division of Fish and Wildlife

U.S.V.I. Animal Fact Sheet #08

Green Iguana

Iguana iguana



Taxonomy

Kingdom	-	-	Anamalia
Phylum	-	-	Chordata
Subphylum	-	-	Vertebrata
Class	-	-	Reptilia
Order	-	-	Squamata
Suborder	-	-	Sauria
Family	-	-	Iguanidae
Genus	-	-	<i>Iguana</i>
species	-	-	<i>iguana</i>

Identification Characteristics

- Size - Largest of the islands lizards
- Color - Juveniles Bright emerald green
- Adults - Green and dark stripes
- Spines - Run the length of the body
- Cheek Scale - Large and Green

Description

The name iguana is derived from the Spanish equivalent to the Carib Indian name "iwana". The green iguana is a reptile and is cold blooded. This means that the animals do not create or maintain their own body heat. To warm up they must find an area that is warm or to bask in the sun to warm up their body.

Iguanas are lizards in which the eyes are the predominant sense organs. Their eyes have well developed eyelids and round pupils. Their tongues are short and thick with a slight fork at the tip. They have spines running from the back of their head to the tail tip.

Reptiles have one advantage over birds and mammals, at least in the Caribbean. They do not need to maintain a constant body temperature and therefore need less food. As a result they can survive in habitats such as the dry east end of St. Thomas and St. Croix, where food is limited.

The most obvious feature of iguanas is their dry scale covered skin. This covering of scales reduces water loss and may facilitate the uptake of solar energy. Certain scales have been modified into spines along the head and backbone, which can dissuade attackers. They also have dewlaps (throat

fans) as well as fringes on the toes that are used for display. Their limbs are well developed and they are five toed.

Juveniles are born with brightly colored green skin, which helps them to hide amongst the leaves of tropical trees. As the iguana ages, the color fades to an aged brown, grey and black color.

Distribution & Habitat

Iguanas are found throughout tropical and subtropical regions of the world. Green iguanas are found throughout the Americas. The species found in the U.S. Virgin Islands is the Green Iguana, (*Iguana iguana*). The Ground Iguana, *Cyclura pinguis*, is found in Puerto Rico as well as Anegada but has not been found in the rest of the VI.

It is possible that the green iguana is not native to the Virgin Islands. One hypothesis is that Precolumbian Indians exterminated the ground iguana (*Cyclura*) hunting them for food and introduced the green iguana from South America to replace them as a food source. Iguanas are considered to be indigenous animals by the Department of Planning and Natural Resources.

Iguanas occupy both xeric habitats (any habitat with little rainfall), and in mesic habitat (habitat

with plentiful rainfall and well drained soils). In the USVI green iguanas they are found throughout the islands, in *Acacia* thickets, along mangrove edges, on cemetery walls. Iguanas are diurnal (they are active in the day). They spend their time thermoregulating (maintaining their body temperature by moving from sun to shade and back again) and foraging on bushes, trees, on open rocky ground, cliff faces, and rocky crevices. Juveniles sleep in low trees and bushes, adults probably sleep in large trees, in rock piles; rock crevices; or in burrows.

Diet

Iguanas are herbivores, meaning that their diet is primarily comprised of plants, fruits and seeds. Iguanas consume a great variety of plant materials, although they mainly feed on leaves and fruits, especially as adults. As juveniles their diet may include insects as well as plants. This is not unusual, many species of lizards will shift their diets with maturity and seasonal changes in the availability of food.

Reproduction

In most reptiles there is sexual dimorphism (the two sexes differ in adult size, shape or color). The males of many lizards are bigger than the females. The difference between the sexes are particularly striking among the iguanid families. Males tend to be more brightly colored, especially in the breeding season, and in some species they possess erectile crests and throat fans which play a role in courtship and territorial displays.

All reptiles practice internal fertilization, the sperm being introduced directly into the female's cloaca, the common opening, which transmits eggs or sperm and excretory products.

Male iguanas and other lizards have evolved paired organs called hemipenes, which are used to fertilize the females. Only one hemipene is used at a time.

Breeding is greatly influenced by environmental factors such as temperature and the duration of daylight. In the VI, iguanas breed in late January to early March. During this time we see iguanas scurrying across our roads.

Most lizards exhibit little maternal care, except for finding and excavating a suitable site for egg laying. A female typically lays her eggs beneath a

log or beneath a rock where humidity is relatively high. The green iguana will lay as many as 45 eggs in one clutch. Iguanas lay eggs, which are resistant to drying out. These eggs possess a shell, which may be pliable or parchment-like in texture. The incubation period is long compared to other lizards, about three months. Hatching from the egg is facilitated by the presence of a sharp, forward pointing egg tooth, which is later shed.

What you can do to HELP

- ◆ DO NOT FEED IGUANAS!! Iguanas are attracted to food and become very abundant if fed. They will also lose their natural fear of humans and become aggressive. At restaurants they may jump on patrons and bite or scratch them. They may also try to steal food from guests plates.
- ◆ Reducing the amount of pesticides and chemicals we use to control pests will help our native animals.
- ◆ Remember it is illegal to take, catch, possess, injure, harass, or kill any indigenous species. The only exceptions are for people holding valid permits from the Division of Fish and Wildlife.
- ◆ Report poachers to your local Environmental Enforcement office, or dial 911.
- ◆ For more information on this and other animals in the Virgin Islands please visit our website at: www.vifishandwildlife.com

**Written by William Coles 2002.
THIS PUBLICATION WAS PRODUCED WITH
FUNDS FROM THE WILDLIFE
CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION
PROGRAM (WCRP).
FOR MORE INFORMATION ON
OUR NATIVE ANIMALS CONTACT
DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

6291 ESTATE NAZARETH, 101,
ST. THOMAS, VI 00802
PHONE 340-775-6762 FAX 340-775-3972
or
45 MARS HILL, ST. CROIX, VI 00840
PHONE 340-772-1955 FAX 340-772-3227**