

GREEN IGUANA

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Escaped pets and releases by animal dealers have resulted in the introduction of green iguanas in parts of southern Florida. South Florida's sub-tropical climate is similar to regions in Central and South America, where iguanas are a native species, so the large lizards feel quite at home in lower reaches of the Sunshine State. In fact, they thrive there. Iguanas can be huge — much bigger than any other lizard that occurs in the United States. Big male iguanas can measure more than six feet long from the head to the tip of the tail. So believe me, if you are in South Florida and you see an iguana, you won't confuse it with any native U.S. species. Iguanas have large heads and a row of large spines down the neck and back. The young are bright green (some have orange or brown bands on their bodies). Iguanas are true herbivores, feeding on a variety of leaves, fruits, and flowers. They spend much of their time basking over canals or ponds, where they can escape danger by plunging headfirst into the water. They are accomplished swimmers and can remain submerged for long periods of time without surfacing for air.

Much of what I know about green iguanas I learned from first-hand experience. Years ago, while working at Everglades National Park, I took a trip to Miami to catch iguanas, the “big game” of the lizard species, inhabiting the wilds of South Florida. A friend and I arrived at a canal near the Florida International Airport, where we were prepared (we thought) to capture our quarry. Armed with swim masks and burlap bags, we crept down to the edge of the canal. Just as we reached the water, we heard crashing in the trees above us. As we looked up, a 6-ft lizard launched itself from the tree, landing in the canal beside us. The huge animal immediately dove to the bottom and disappeared from sight. “Hmmm...” we thought. “Perhaps this won't be as easy as we imagined.” After several more glimpses of disappearing iguana tails, we decided to rethink our strategy. The next plan was to float down the middle of the canal with just our heads above the surface — “We'll catch them as they plummet from the trees.” We even disguised ourselves with sticks, logs, and aquatic weeds, so we looked like harmless brush piles. When conducting ecological research, one often finds that ideas are better in theory than in practice. Let's just say we didn't severely deplete the population of iguanas in that canal. In fact, after hours of swimming and walking the canals, we had seen 25-30 iguanas, but had not touched a single one. Lesson learned: Any lizard that tastes as good as an iguana (it tastes like chicken, of course) must be pretty hard to catch!

This information is provided by Savannah River Ecology Laboratory Outreach and SPARC.

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