

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Observation on Habits of the Cuban Iguana¹

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The Cuban Iguana (*Cyclura macleayi* [= *C. nubila*]) is a very agile and extremely wary animal, more dependent upon its vision than upon sound for protection. It generally catches sight of possible enemies before being seen. When off guard, as in eating or while sunning itself, it may be surprised, if one approaches carefully; but once alarmed and on guard, it cannot be approached successfully.

In its departure from threatened danger this reptile almost never covers the entire distance to its hiding place in one dash, unless absolutely forced to do so. Usually it advances or withdraws in short spurts of fifteen or twenty yards, poising then like a dog on the alert, listening for any sound. It stretches the neck upward and bobs its head in a rhythmical and comical movement. When it again scents or sights danger, it makes another dash of similar length, and so on until it reaches its hiding place, which in general is a hole or pocket in the rocks. Here it hastens to take refuge and settles down in fancied security. If the hunter finds it in a rather shallow hiding place not affording complete concealment, the Iguana opens its mouth in threatening fashion and gives voice to a disconcerting hoarse noise.

The mobility and agility of this lizard is astonishing to one who has only seen it traveling at ease, with no cause for fright or

alarm. It then seems heavy and slothful dragging its belly along the ground and leaving a track or furrow formed by the long, heavy tail. It is so agile, however, that with a few strides it can climb up a twenty-five foot stone wall or a tall tree, which it often does to satisfy its appetite. When surprised aloft it makes a single leap to the ground, and then sets out at high speed.

Unlike most Cuban reptiles, which are active during the hours of darkness, the Iguana, like a few other lizards as the 'Chameleon' [= Anoles, genus *Anolis*] and 'Bayoya' [Curly-tailed Lizards, genus *Leiocephalus*], is active during the middle of the day, when the sun is highest. Rarely is it seen before nine o'clock in the morning or after five in the afternoon. If found at such times, it is slow and lethargic. On cloudy or rainy days, it is not seen.

The Iguana may live in areas which completely lack water for drinking even in pits or hollows that might collect rainwater. It is found also on very small areas of land, such as keys and tiny islands. Fishermen from regions of numerous small islands tell me that they have seen the Iguana moving from key to key, crossing narrows of more than two hundred yards in width by swimming on the surface with the tail employed in the manner of a sculling oar.

The Iguana is an animal that prefers a solitary life, never being found naturally in groups; however, it tolerates collective life when constrained to live so. I keep large numbers together and have never witnessed a single fight amongst them. On cool nights they even huddle together presumably for the purpose of warmth conservation.

Cyclura macleayi reaches a very considerable size; I have had specimens up to 60 inches in length. In these lizards the tail is a most important organ, from the standpoint both of health and resistance. A fat tail on either a young or old specimen is a sign of good health, and that the individual can endure long enclosure and long voyages. However, the tip of the tail is so fragile that it will readily break off in the grip of the incautious handler. The teeth are small and sharp, the bite powerful enough to crush small bones.

The Iguana is omnivorous, eating fruits, vegetables, and ripe bananas, varied in captivity with left-overs from the table such as cereals, meat, and fish.



Adult Cuban Iguana (*Cyclura nubila*). Photograph by Thomas Wiewandt.

¹ Translated by Dr. D. F. Munro. Reprinted with permission from *Herpetologica* 7:124 (1951). Bracketed names were added and one typographical error corrected.