

TRAVELOGUE

Mayan Reptiles

Michael A. Powell

Truman State University, Kirksville, Missouri

All photographs by Michael or Robert Powell.

We had nearly made it to the top of the massive pyramid at Ek Balam (how the Mayans climbed these suckers is a mystery to me; they were short little guys and the steps were tall and steep). I happened to glance over to a small shelf adjacent to the reconstructed steps, only to see an iguana staring back at me. Iguanas (*Ctenosaura similis*) are common on and around the ruins, which provide ample retreats and basking sites while offering protection officially afforded the ruins, but obviously extending to their reptilian residents as well.

Having traveled with my father my entire life, I have learned to expect that some portion of any given trip will involve time spent with the local fauna. I therefore had no illusions going into our holiday trip to the Yucatán Peninsula. Truth be told, I didn't really mind. It would have been hard growing up with someone like my dad and not developing an appreciation for that sort of thing.

We encountered animals with some degree of regularity, although the weather wasn't necessarily ideal, particularly for herps — or the locals, who complained bitterly about the cold. We, in stark contrast, were glad to be wearing shorts and t-shirts, while news of snow and ice storms back home dominated the weather channel.

Our first animal encounter was a Collared Toucan (*Pteroglossus torquatus*) that welcomed us to México as we emerged from the airport. Unfortunately, this was the only toucan sighting of the trip. The next day, however, we found something more up our alley. While wandering around the Mayan ruins at Chichen Itzá and Ek Balam, we found the iguanas that

had taken up residence there. On one of the smaller structures at Chichen Itzá, we counted sixteen lizards while standing on one spot. Although the cool conditions were not what one could call prime iguana weather, we found more than enough to make a destination selected for its historical interest more than a little interesting from a biological perspective. In addition to encounters at the ruins, we regularly saw iguanas on the grounds of our resort, where several had taken up residence in rock piles at one



A juvenile *Ameiva undulata* takes advantage of refuges provided by the crumbling ruins and of the protection afforded this screened stand supporting an ancient Mayan tablet.



Near the top of the pyramid at Ek Balam, I glanced to the side and saw an iguana staring back.



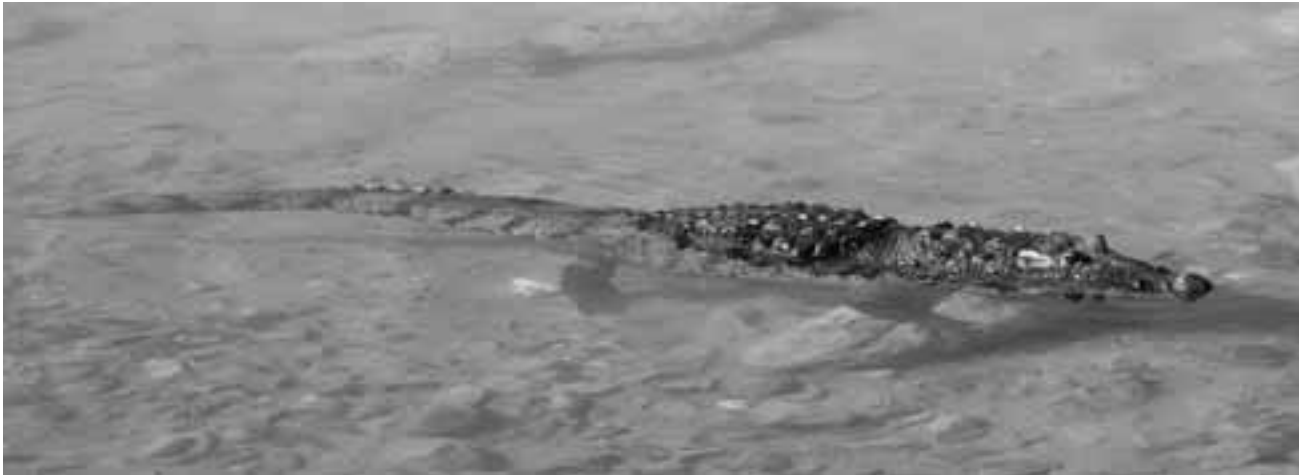
Ctenosaurs (*Ctenosaura similis*) are abundant on the Mayan ruins at Chichen Itzá.

end of a large pond with signs that warned us not to feed the crocodiles. Unfortunately, we never did see the crocs there.

We did, however, see crocs near the archaeological site at Cobá. My dad was attempting to photograph a Motmot (a bird with a pair of bizarre tail feathers that appear to be missing portions of their vanes) when a gardener warned him about the crocs in the lake. Of course, a warning for ordinary folks is a call to action for us. We quickly crawled through the carefully trimmed hedges near the shoreline and immediately came upon a 12-foot-long croc lazily basking in the shallows. Morelet's Crocodiles (*Crocodylus moreletii*) are an endangered species that once ranged widely through Middle America. Years of exploitation have left only a few occupying isolated enclaves such as the lakes at Cobá. Here the crocs are relatively common and often congregate near shore, where locals sometimes feed them scraps to entertain the tourists. The individuals we encountered were either well-fed or we didn't look or smell too tasty, since they were content to bask as we photographed them to our heart's content from only a couple of meters away.



A Turquoise-browed Motmot (*Eumomota superciliosa*) near the lakes at the Cobá archaeological site.



These Morelet's Crocodiles (*Crocodylus moreletii*) in the lake at Cobá were not at all disturbed by our presence.

Perhaps the most interesting encounters involved the highway. When traveling, we always stop from time to time to examine roadkills. Generally, that's what we find — roadkill. Twice on this trip, however, we encountered something much more interesting. We were driving the back roads from Chichen Itzá to Ek Balam when we saw a fairly large snake in the middle of the road. Dad immediately said: "Boa!" and hit the brakes. After a quick U-turn, we were once again approaching the snake and my dad was turning to pull off to the side of the road. As he leaned out the window to see if the snake was alive or not, he failed to see an oncoming car — at least not until my mom brought him back to reality. Fortunately, dad continued off the road and the other driver adroitly avoided hitting us. Dad immediately jumped out of the car and picked up the snake —



Rescuing a boa (*Boa constrictor*) from the highway nearly resulted in a collision with oncoming traffic.



The Barba Amarilla (*Bothrops asper*) is a common and deadly snake.

a fairly good-sized *Boa constrictor*. The driver of the other car also pulled over and got out. To Dad's dismay, he was wearing the uniform of the local policia. Dad immediately apologized in his broken Spanish (I caught the words "estoy idiota"). Fortunately for us, the policeman seemed a bit taken aback by a gringo who picks snakes up off the road. He stopped well short of us, asked if the snake was alive. As dad responded in the affirmative, the cop smiled nervously, shrugged, got back in his car, and drove away. We took several photos, which didn't seem to please the snake at all — I kind of felt like I was playing paparazzi to the boa's Sean Penn as it struck repeatedly at me and the camera.

Later the same day, after touring the archaeological zone of Ek Balam, we saw another snake crawling across the road. This time we stopped without incident. Dad immediately recognized it as a Barba Amarilla (*Bothrops asper*), one of the more common snakes in the region and also one of the most dangerous. Having already experienced the hostility of local reptiles toward photographers, I opted not to get involved with this one; instead I merely watched from the car as dad rescued the snake, photographed it, and then encouraged it to crawl off into the brush alongside the road.

As our trips to the tropics go, we spent relatively little time in the Yucatán hunting critters. That said, the time we did spend was exciting enough (read: had enough near-death experiences) to keep me satisfied.

A Yucatecan Adventure

It's hard not to feel some sense of adventure when you're standing on top of a pyramid built by a long dead civilization, looking out over a thick, green jungle — even though the person standing next to you appears to have been getting his senior citizen discount for a good 15 years, ropes and guard rails everywhere try to keep the less coordinated from plummeting to their deaths, and souvenir shops are visible back where you parked. Nevertheless, I felt as though I should have donned my fedora and grabbed my trusty bullwhip before setting out on such an expedition — but I'm getting somewhat ahead of myself.

The day after arriving in México, we visited Chichen Itzá, one of the best known of the Mayan ruins that dot the Yucatán Peninsula and adjacent regions of Central America. I knew something about the ruins already; my dad had been here 25 years ago, and had given me a bit of a briefing. We paid for our tickets and entered the park. A short walk from the entrance, we emerged from the forest into a clearing dominated by a towering pyramid, every architectural feature of which seemingly represented some aspect of Mayan astronomy. We set out to climb the massive structure. We had arrived early in order to avoid the