

# Feeding Behavior of a Free-Ranging *Iguana iguana* in the Lower Florida Keys

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In January 1993, a friend working at the Dreher Park Zoo in Palm Beach, Florida brought us an unsolicited young female green iguana. She had been quarantined at the zoo for three months and appeared to be about six months old. Here at Finca Cyclura, she was housed on a 16 x 3.3 ft. screened balcony (328 sq. ft.). She fed voraciously and grew rapidly, sunning herself in the shifting patches of sunlight and thermoregulated by reclining on a 60 watt incandescent light fixture on a 40 gallon aquarium which housed two hatchling *Cyclura cornuta*. By early summer, I was anxious to find alternate housing for her, as she had grown substantially and was becoming more difficult to clean up after. She had also started exploring the house and causing minor problems before returning to her porch territory. On 22 June, 1993 during one of her explorations she exited the building by way of an open sliding glass door. She was recovered the following day from vegetation next to the house and returned to the balcony.

Mikey, as this iguana was called, was not a pet. She did not tolerate being touched or approached, and would whip her tail at the offender

at the slightest provocation. She exhibited no fear of humans, but clearly associated them with food. If someone showed too much interest toward her, she simply moved away.

On 3 July the iguana left the building on her third adventure, while I was out feeding other iguanas. When I noticed she was missing I made no attempt to locate her, as I felt strongly that she would remain in the vicinity. She was easily located the following day, but not approached. She was sighted four of the next five days in the vegetation surrounding the house. On 10 July a paper plate of food was left on the center deck of the house adjacent to the door she had exited. The procedure was repeated the next day and within two



Free-ranging *Iguana iguana* eats food from a paper plate. 1994 (left). 1996 (above). This iguana consistently fed 30% of the days per year for a 4½ year period. Photograph: R.W. Ehrig



*Iguana iguana* leaves feeding station by way of stairs.  
 Photograph: R.W. Ehrig

hours the iguana walked up the stairs, consumed the food in less than ten minutes, then departed.

During the next four and a half years the iguana would feed between 103 and 112 days per year. Over 90% of the time she would feed between 0900 and 1400 hrs. On the days when she would arrive before her plate of food was prepared, she would wait at the spot where her food was normally left. She entered mostly from above, climbing down a blackbead tree from the steel roof or from a large mahogany on the north side of the building. Often she would eat most of her meal,

climb down the stairs to defecate in the understory vegetation at the base of the stairway, then return to finish her meal, climb the railing, and exit through the trees. Guests were most amazed at this routine.

The iguana would sometimes enter the house, walk around for ten minutes and leave. She returned to her balcony on at least seven occasions. If food preparation was slow she sometimes would enter the house and wait in the kitchen.

The food offered consisted primarily of collards, mustards, spinach, mixed vegetables, squash, broccoli, bananas, grapes, and other greens and vegetables. She was observed eating *Ipomea*, *Tabebuia*, *Lysiloma*, and *Ficus* in the area around the house. The diet items we provided made up the majority of her caloric consumption. Her feeding was much reduced in late December, January, and February. These are the coldest months of the year in the Lower Florida Keys with night time temperatures often reaching the low and mid 60's.

Mikey occasionally encountered feral green iguanas, which have become increasingly common in the Florida Keys in the last decade. She seemed to avoid her own species, and on two occasions we watched male iguanas pursue her through the tree canopy. She preferred a solitary existence.

1993	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
01		■	■			
02		■				■
03			■			
04		■	■			
05			■			
06		■	■			
07		■	■			
08		■	■			■
09			■			■
10			■			■
11	■		■			■
12			■			
13			■		■	
14			■	■	■	
15	■			■	■	
16	■				■	
17			■		■	
18					■	
19	■				■	
20			■		■	
21					■	
22	■		■		■	
23	■		■		■	
24	■	■	■		■	
25					■	
26	■	■			■	
27	■	■			■	
28	■				■	
29						
30	■					
31						
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>5</b>
	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>
<b>Total days fed in 6 months: 61</b>						

In early April, 1996 Mikey fell 25 feet out of a tree and lost one third of her tail. During this same period she was gravid and her condition probably made climbing more awkward. On 16 April, 1996 she entered the house and spent two hours searching around and under furniture in the living room, kitchen, and office before leaving. On 18 April, 1996 she laid a large clutch of infertile eggs in a raised planting bed for cacti about 300 feet from the house (see photos). She had found the most suitable nesting area on her own.

My experience with this iguana over the last half decade has convinced me of the potential of iguanas as free-ranging livestock. The iguana is still not fully understood or appreciated and is certainly much more efficient than most of the other species that humans have chosen to domesticate.



A special thank you to John Bendon for collating the data from field notes.



Free-ranging *Iguana iguana* excavates nest cavity in raised cactus bed. 18 April, 1996, Finca Cyclura. Photograph: R.W. Ehrig

1994	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
01					■	■		■			■	
02					■	■		■		■		
03					■			■		■		■
04					■	■		■		■	■	
05					■	■		■	■			■
06						■			■			
07					■	■			■			■
08						■					■	
09					■	■			■		■	■
10					■	■		■				
11				■	■							■
12				■					■		■	
13				■		■						■
14				■	■	■		■				
15					■			■	■			
16					■	■		■	■		■	
17					■	■		■	■		■	
18				■	■	■		■	■			
19				■	■	■		■	■			
20				■	■	■		■				
21				■	■	■		■			■	
22				■		■					■	
23					■	■		■				
24					■	■						
25				■		■						
26						■						
27			■	■	■	■					■	
28			■		■	■						
29			■	■	■	■						
30				■	■	■		■		■		■
31			■		■							■
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>	<b>DAYS</b>

Total days fed in 12 months: 112

**1995** (Data unavailable)

Total days fed in 12 months: 112

1996	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
01			■	■		■	■		■			
02					■			■				
03							■					
04							■	■			■	
05					■	■	■	■			■	■
06			■		■	■	■	■	■		■	■
07						■	■	■	■		■	■
08						■	■	■				
09					■	■	■	■			■	
10				■	■		■	■				
11						■	■	■				■
12						■			■			■
13				■		■	■	■				■
14					■	■	■	■	■			
15			■		■	■	■	■				
16					■	■	■		■			
17			■			■	■		■		■	
18								■	■			
19				■	■		■	■	■			
20			■				■	■	■			
21				■								
22												
23								■				
24			■		■				■		■	
25			■		■		■			■		
26		■		■	■		■			■		
27					■		■	■	■			
28		■		■	■						■	
29			■					■	■			■
30			■	■	■			■			■	
31								■		■		
<b>TOTAL DAYS</b>	<b>0 DAYS</b>	<b>2 DAYS</b>	<b>9 DAYS</b>	<b>9 DAYS</b>	<b>15 DAYS</b>	<b>13 DAYS</b>	<b>17 DAYS</b>	<b>14 DAYS</b>	<b>14 DAYS</b>	<b>3 DAYS</b>	<b>9 DAYS</b>	<b>6 DAYS</b>

Total days fed in 12 months: 111

1997	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
01					■	■		■				■
02							■	■	■			
03							■	■				
04							■	■		■		
05	■			■		■		■				
06							■	■				■
07						■	■	■				
08						■	■	■				
09	■		■				■	■		■		■
10					■			■				■
11			■			■	■	■				
12				■	■		■	■	■		■	■
13		■		■		■		■				
14					■	■	■	■	■		■	
15	■				■	■			■			
16						■		■				
17						■	■					
18	■					■	■	■				
19						■	■	■				
20					■	■	■				■	
21						■		■				
22			■		■	■	■	■	■			
23						■				■		
24			■				■	■				
25							■	■			■	
26			■				■	■				
27				■	■		■	■	■		■	
28			■				■					
29					■			■			■	
30							■	■				
31					■							
<b>TOTAL DAYS</b>	<b>2 DAYS</b>	<b>3 DAYS</b>	<b>6 DAYS</b>	<b>4 DAYS</b>	<b>10 DAYS</b>	<b>18 DAYS</b>	<b>20 DAYS</b>	<b>21 DAYS</b>	<b>6 DAYS</b>	<b>2 DAYS</b>	<b>6 DAYS</b>	<b>5 DAYS</b>

Total days fed in 12 months: 103