

## IGUANA RESCUE

## Spot, Socks, Stanly and E.T.

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Seeing iguanas in poor captive situations causes a dilemma for people who love them. One can leave an unfortunate iguana where he is—where he may die, perhaps slowly—or one can take the lizard home. You “rescue” the iguana, give him a chance, then he’s your responsibility. You are taking a responsibility that you did, and did not choose, that isn’t really yours. You take the animal out of compassion, and maybe guilt about human exploitation of iguanas. Of course, there are other reasons—it’s fun to have iguanas: each lizard is different, wonderful to watch and hold. You feel proud of your lizards, and saving them makes you feel good. A group of iguanas is a kind of family with joys and responsibilities with which one may desire to fill up one’s life.

Because iguanas are popular, readily available pets, and are little understood, many live in poor captive situations. It’s impossible to take care of them all. Your time and resources reach their limit. You have to turn a blind eye and try not to think about it too much. And sometimes you think: If I could build a bigger house... I have kept green iguanas for 27 years, always in numbers that press my capacities. I can’t seem to not have them. They’ve all been damaged or unwanted individuals I’ve “rescued.” Following is just a bit about my current iguana family. I am neither discussing husbandry here, nor will I attempt to explain my behavioral observations—this is anecdotal.

Three iguanas is just a hair beyond the limit for our home: we live in the third bay of a restored, 100 year old barn in the northeastern United States. Space for big tropical lizards is not quite adequate; they do have plenty of heat, an excellent diet from our garden, and sunshine all summer and into November. Sometimes, they get out for brief exposure as early as February when the sunlight is quite direct.

E.T. died last winter, which meant that Spot was left with Socks. Spot, who has always had at least two females, was despondent. Using his well-being and happiness as a good excuse, I set about

getting another iguana. There were several iguanas for sale in the classifieds of the local paper, and of these one was certainly female. “How do you know you’ve got a female?” I asked. “Well, she laid eggs!” said the girl, “After we named her ‘Stanly.’”

I met the girl in the parking lot of a Ramada Inn, in Scranton, PA. It was early February. Her father had driven the car, so she could hold Stanly for the last time. They were moving soon, and she thought she should find another home for her iguana.

I went to the passenger side door of their car, and Stanly was handed to me through the window, and without pause, tucked under my sweater. Though she was a reptile, and not a mammal, Stanly warmed me in different ways. I gave the girl fifty dollars for Stanly, and she proceeded to tell me a few things about her. “Here’s her leash and harness—she gets a little unpredictable when you take her outside. Oh, she likes to be wrapped up in a towel and sit next to me while I watch T.V. That’s when she’s most calm. “Really?” I said. Stanly was an incredible bright green, and surprisingly large. I peeked at her under my sweater—she had wide-open, nervous eyes. “What have you been feeding her?” I asked. “Well, mostly romaine lettuce, spinach, carrots, zucchini, melon, grapes, and reptile vitamins.” “Have you had a Vitalite® for her?” I asked. “Oh, yes, and I took her out sun-tanning with me a lot. That’s when she got really excited—that’s when I bought the leash, because once she ran away from me and I nearly lost her!” What better testament for direct sunshine?

When I got Stanly home, I found hard deposits in her thighs, hidden by her ample flesh. These went away in about two months. Since the day she arrived, she has eaten massive quantities. Now, a year later, Stanly’s SVL has increased two inches. Her bright green skin is more patterned; her youthful, pale gold eyes are striking, and wild, like a Velociraptor in *Jurassic Park*. I tend to wonder about the T.V. watching, wrapped in a towel. Stanley does not tolerate a towel around her after

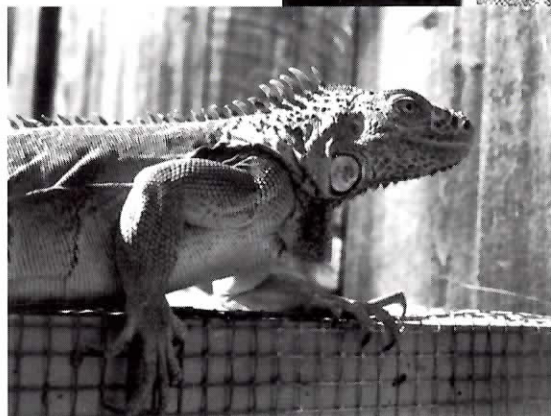
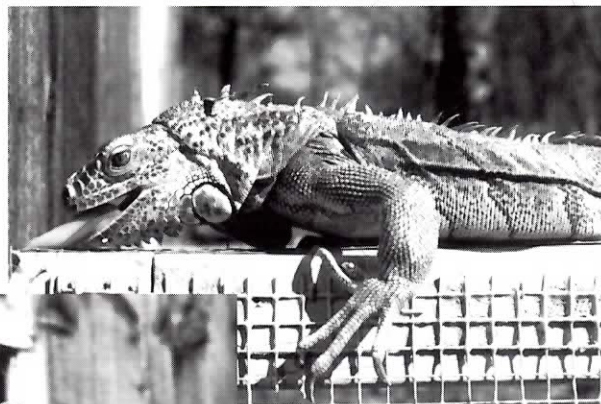
her bath as Spot and Socks do. In fact, I figured out it was the towel hanging near the bathtub that made her fly into hysterics. I moved the towel out of sight, and no more hysterics. She is less nervous these days, but she's not the kind of girl to bring to an educational presentation for children.

That's where Spot comes in. He is a gentle, reliable iguana. Many, many children have put their hands and fingers on every inch of his head and body. He sits patiently in my hands, eyes open and alert, long enough for me to say a few words, and for about thirty kids to have their turn touching him. Then it's time for part two of the Spot show: he begins to struggle just a bit when he wants to get down, walk around some, assess territory, climb up on something—or someone tall (me)—and assert himself with his series of head-bobs: “Any and all females watching, I'm the best—come here. Any males—the females are mine, and so is what I'm sitting on.”

Spot was comfortable with people at an early age. He accepts us as incidental beings. He puts up with a lot of hugging and kissing, and doesn't usually shut his eyes to block it out: exchanges with people are part of the routine. He has always been more interested in what iguanas are doing, and is so driven in his interaction with other iguanas that

their company seems vitally important to him. Spot is a handsome, stately iguana. Words scarcely describe his presence, he is just remarkable. I have known and cared for him for sixteen years.

Socks and Spot are a pair: they mate each autumn, and there's digging and digging and digging and—no eggs. Socks reabsorbs them—good for her! She is about two thirds Stanly's size, and I doubt she'll grow much. Socks was another rescue. When I got her, three of four limbs had suffered injuries that went unnoticed. To one who has seen damaged iguanas this is evident. To the touch it is more obvious for the joints feel misshapen and fused. Socks' left rear leg cannot extend fully. She's a funny girl—whenever approached, she stiffens with eyes shut tight and dewlap extended. She doesn't relax until she's picked up, or left alone. Once out and about, she's calm and approachable. Sometimes Socks and



Left to right: Stanly, Spot, and Socks. Photographs: Wendy Townsend

Stanly bicker, they have their push-leaning matches, they charge each other and hiss. Other times they lie on top of one another basking peacefully. Often, Spot is underneath both of them, apparently content. I remember when Spot came home to our barn after being away a while. He was shaky, and unsure of his new surroundings. Socks did not take her eyes off him. She attended him, never moving more than a few inches away, and always with some part of her draped over some part of him. She tongue-flicked him constantly. It was as if she wanted to ensure his comfort and health so he would be a good mate. Once he settled in and was himself, much of Socks' attention returned to her own interests—like getting back out to the flower bed, or just plain getting somewhere. Socks likes to explore and go—taste this, nibble that—dig here, bask there. She walks circles in the yard, round and round, in her private explorations, having a good time. She's the only one who will sometimes climb the screen door of the cage and make a real racket wanting out. Spot likes going out for sunshine to forage, and have a look around. But predictably, after 15–20 minutes, he walks briskly, with determination back to the barn entrance to watch his territory—their cage. If all three iguanas are near the open cage door, Spot corrals the other two, bobbing his head vigorously. Socks would gladly spend her days outside, and likely wouldn't stray very far if left alone. Stanly cannot walk about the yard freely, as she would take off for the woods in a second. She feels secure in their cage, and is agreeable to returning to it. Has she ever known anything else?

So—that's a little bit about Spot, Socks, and Stanly. They have it pretty good, I guess.

I believe what keeps them vital is each other. One day soon, we will build a new space for iguanas where one can enter and be among them, rather than looking in at them. I think that's the best way to get to know "pet" iguanas.

I'd like to add some words about E.T. She was 11 years old, and laid 7 clutches of eggs during her life.

I had not seen an iguana, still living, as horribly damaged as E.T. Her face remains a vivid image to me. She arrived in a pillowcase, and when I pulled it away from her head, I was amazed. This was a bright-eyed, energetic iguana with a collapsed bottom jaw. There was the broken bone jutting out under her skin. What was it like for the iguana when that happened? What was it like to eat with only half of a mouth? To watch E.T. go after a meal was moving. She looked like a starving animal trying to get some food down. The mixed salads I prepared for the iguanas were good for her, since I could form little rolls or peaks of the stuff which she could get her mouth around. E.T. hated having a dirty mouth, and she couldn't clean it the way other iguanas do. I would put her



**E.T.** Note the extreme "overbite" due to the broken lower jaw. The broken bone juts out under the skin, seen just above the subtympnic plate. *Photograph: Wendy Townsend*


in the bathtub and clean the exposed roof of her mouth. When she died, I was relieved of a lot of hand-feeding and work. I miss her.

Following are excerpts from a record of E.T.'s activities as reported to me by caretakers of the animal learning center at a facility for disabled persons: "...E.T.'s the mascot of the animal room—we love her. She needs extra attention, but she's no shrinking violet. She is a busy, energetic iguana. When she first arrived, weary from Spot and loaded with eggs, she still had an activity level that earned her free range of the room. A large water basin and hiding box with overhead heat lamp were offered as a designated area. She chose her own place, and her things were moved there. For two weeks she drank volumes of water, ate almost nothing, and searched for a nesting site. She tucked her eggs under plants around the sandy play area, and not in the nest box of soil and moss provided..." After egg-laying, E.T. was moved to a large cage with branches and plants.

Her collapsed jaw left her needing help with meals. The caretakers work with human beings who need help eating, and learned to feed E.T. She has taught them her preferences for who may feed her or be present while she dines. There are two Facility employees she dislikes: one can't get near her cage, the other can't even enter the room. When either of these humans comes into E.T.'S

field of vision (the entire room) her behavior includes halting of activity, glaring with widened eyes, backing down and away, and loud hissing. The human who can't approach her cage has an exaggerated limp. The one who really gets her going is kind of gruff and says "They eat those things down in the jungle!" He doesn't much feel like getting near her either... E.T. is very watchful of human activity, less watchful of the other iguanas.

During the nest-search, E.T. tore her forearm on a baseboard heater. Her wound grew swollen with an abscess, adding to her thinness and her parrot-mouth so she looked like a mess limping around on three legs. She could really be a lot of work. E.T. has always been the kind of beast who could find a way to get into a little trouble. She's the type who would go over and claw at an electrical outlet while the other lizards were busy with more normal iguana activity. For E.T., only life in a vacuum would be completely safe.

In a two year chapter of E.T.'s life she adjusted to changes of home, gravity, injury, and more people. She grew two inches in length, and gained weight to match her growth. Her skin became lustrous and the scar on her arm became hard to see. She was hungry and busy as ever. Whatever her life's experiences, E.T.'s character remained strong and adaptive. 

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