

LIZARD LETTERS

The Really Big Iguana Contest

"How long did you say this iguana is?" I asked. "He's 6 ft. long and I'm looking for a good home," replied the iguanas owner. I answered, "I'm sorry, I just don't believe you—the length simply can't be correct. Send me a photograph of Spike with two yard sticks end to end along side of him and I'll see what I can do for you."

I've heard too many shaggy iguana stories in the time I've been operating the Connecticut Iguana Sanctuary, and I find that most people are just not very good at estimating lengths. I remember the lady who was looking to relocate a pair of "5 ft. males." "That's pretty big," I said, "and I'll bet you anything that one or more of your 'males' is a female if they've been cohabitating peacefully for as long as you say." I had that listing on my books for months before I finally went out to visit Fred and Henry. Sure enough, "Freda" and Henry turned out to be 3 ft. and 4 ft. respectively and as soon as I had an accurate description of them I was able to find them a home together in very short order.

And then there was the infamous 17 ft. python. This was shortly after I'd had an article about my iguana rehabilitation work published in the local newspaper. (It did not appear, as some of my colleagues claim, in Martha Stewart's column entitled "Home Decorating with Live Reptiles"). The author had included my telephone number at the end of the article instead of publishing the address of the I.I.S. as I had asked him. Within a week I'd gotten dozens of calls from people begging me to take in or place their iguanas, but the most urgent call was regarding a snake. "I know this guy who's been keeping a 17 ft. python in a garbage can for 4 months. Can you find a home for it?" First we had to convince the owner to give up this poor animal. We had to come up with transportation for him to my house and I had to find some more appropriate temporary housing than a garbage can. Just shortly before midnight on that same day that I had received the call, I had four very large

men carry a very large snake through my front door. "Just lay him down on the carpet here, I want to measure this guy" You'd think I'd have better things to do with a snake who hadn't eaten for 4 months than stretching him out in my front hall! My tape measure and the carpet both quit at 12 ft. We hadn't, however, been able to uncoil the snake completely and he was clearly longer than the carpet. Even at that, I estimate he couldn't really have been more than 13 ft long at most. He eventually did find a home, but that's another story (the Really Big Snake Contest).

But we were talking about big iguanas weren't we? Anyway, the biggest green iguana I had seen up to this point was one I had taken in several months before. Bunny measured 4 ft. 6 in. when I first saw him, but he was a bit scrawny and bright flaming orange from stem to stern! He'd been fed nothing but shaved carrots for a year and a half and had the worst case of hypervitaminosis I'd ever seen. Once I switched him to a more appropriate diet, his color started to change back and he put on the weight he needed, but I remember that even his shed skin had an orange tint to it at first.

Anyhow, two weeks after that initial phone call, I received the promised photos of Spike in the mail with a letter apologizing for the mistake as he only measured 5 ft., 2 in. So now, instead of a 6 ft. lizard I was looking for a home for one who was only 5 ft.! I tried to interest various potential adopters, but it quickly became apparent that he wasn't of much interest to the average new iguana parent.

"You know we don't need any more iguanas in the house. If you want this big guy, you've got to find a home for one of the others," said my husband—and he was right—fifteen iguanas in the house was certainly enough. The numbers actually ended up climbing before I finally located homes for a number of them and was able to plan my trip to Manhattan to pick up Spike.

"How are you going to carry him out to your car? I have some gloves you can borrow. Do you have a carrying case big enough for him?" asked the owner.



5½ foot-long Asimov poses for the contest. Note the tape on him at one foot increments. *Photograph: Michael Gutman*



AJ and Asimov. Photograph: Michael Gutman

Not every woman regularly tosses large lizards over her shoulder and carries them in and out of lecture halls and library auditoriums, but I do. I've never worn gloves while handling iguanas, and I've never met an iguana who didn't enjoy sitting in the back window of my Dodge Neon. None of these things had ever posed a challenge to me before, but somehow I got spooked. I dug out some gloves and an old leather jacket and my husband rigged up some pieces of a big dog crate between the front and back seats of my car to contain "the monster" and off I drove.

Sorry, I hate suspense so I'll just skip to the end of the story. I carried Spike outside without the gloves or jacket. He did get scared in the elevator, but only because of a shrieking neighbor. ("It's alright, sweetheart, the lady won't hurt you," I reassured my charge.) He started out in the back window of my car, but before we had turned the corner to head back out of Manhattan, Spike had managed to slide forward into my lap where he gazed, wide-eyed as a child, at the city he had lived in for 6 years and never seen except through an 8th floor apartment window. He happily remained there all the way home to Connecticut, but I got suspicious as I carried him through my back garden and had to lift up his tail so as not to trip on it. Sure enough, Asimov, as I had resolved to rename this beautiful guy, turned out to be 5 ft., 5 in. long when I measured him and he's definitely the biggest and heaviest (13 lbs.) iguana I have seen to date! He is very gentle and charming and has ended up joining a pre-existing "family" with Bunny (a male) and his three ladies, Irving, Zelda and Marley. All five iguanas happily bask together and, remarkably, the only social tension in the group seems

to be between Irving and the other ladies. She is particularly sweet on Asimov and gets a little nippy if one of the others tries to get too chummy with him. Don't try this at home. Both Asimov and Bunny eventually succumbed to their male territorial imperatives. Bunny chose to relocate to another area of the house, but only after both combatants had sustained considerable damage. The formerly reclusive Asimov gets out regularly to lecture students on conservation issues, to meet the congregation at the synagogue picnic and to educate the public about proper green iguana care. He has made a number of television appearances and most recently appeared before 500 public school students in Hartford where he will be immortalized in clay as a large relief sculpture dedicated to the endangered iguanas of the world.

So, that's my "really big iguana" story. Now I want to hear yours. The literature always says that green iguanas can reach up to 6 ft. in length. Some sources say up to 5 ft. I even have one book that tries to cover all bases by saying 5 to 6 ft. How big is your "Really Big" iguana? I want to see a picture, and I want to see the yardsticks beside the animal to verify any claims. Don't give me any stories about how your grandma used to have a big lizard "back home in the islands" when you were a kid. Call grandma. If Iggy is still kicking, have her get out her tape measure and the Polaroid and she could win a fashionable I.I.S. T-shirt. All tall tales need to be verified photographically. Taxonomic preparations are not allowed to enter because everyone knows that taxidermists, like poets, tend to stretch the truth. The winning photo will be published in *Iguana Times* and lizards of "respectable length" may see their photos appear on our new web site. Please send all entries to:

AJ Gutman
Really Big Iguana Contest
International Iguana Society
133 Steele Rd.
West Hartford, CT 06119

Deadline for entries is June 30, 1999.

Photographs will not be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope.

LIZARD LETTERS

This is the reply I sent to *Nature* concerning the overwater dispersal of Iguanas, but they have no place to publish it...

Sir — for me, the paper of Censky, *et al.* (1), which relates the discovery of an Iguana raft is not a surprise. I know precise first hand observations made by local scientists and by fishermen who saw frequently, iguanas swimming in the sea, far from the coasts, between the different Guadeloupe Archipelago islands.

To check over-water dispersal, I tried to observe *Iguana delicatissima* at sea. I take males on a boat and allow them to jump in water. One individual jumped on its own, swam for 80 meters, then dove 3 meters deep and stayed 28 minutes under water, then it surfaced and swam, staying for 40 minutes in the water. *Iguana iguana* is able to withstand about 270 minutes under water (2). Even if a raft is a means of over-water dispersal, free swimming of great distances is for iguanas another means of colonization.

Moreover, human transport also explains the islands colonizations. I also have first-hand observations of boatmen throwing living *Iguana iguana* from Les Saintes in a Guadeloupe harbour. This is a common practice because iguanas are so numerous there that they became a pest in the gardens. *Iguana iguana*, which are said (3) to inhabit only some islands of this archipelago, naturally colonized islands where *Iguana delicatissima* was present, competing and hybridizing with them. Now Les Saintes have only *Iguana iguana* and *delicatissima x iguana* hybrids.

During hurricanes iguanas are thrown from their trees by the wind and carried to sea as I saw on a film made by Mr. Plassais in Saint-Barthélemy during Luis. Then, they are able to swim long distances. During hurricane Hugo (1989) the water temperature was 28-29° C (4). These temperatures allow iguanas to swim without being cooled and thus unable to move.

Censky, *et al.* (1) suggested that the iguanas seen in Anguilla, Barbuda, and Antigua came from Guadeloupe. Louis Redaud (Parc national Guadeloupe) told me that a raft with about 15 iguanas was seen one week after Luis between Guadeloupe and Antigua. My british colleague Mark Day (Flora and Fauna International) and I collected iguanas tissues and made biometry for nearly all the Lesser Antilles iguana populations, so we are able to locate, without speculations, the real origin of the raft iguanas.

The assertion of Censky, *et al.* (1) concerning the iguana distribution is wrong. It is based on old statements (3). For example both iguana species inhabit Basse-Terre and *Iguana iguana* competes, hybridizes and eliminates *Iguana delicatissima* there. On Martinique both species are also present and

Iguana iguana was introduced by man from Les Saintes at the beginning of the sixties. Thus, it is difficult to say from where the iguanas came when the real iguana distributions are not known.

So this is not because a raft was seen landing on an island that this means of colonization may explain all the terrestrial vertebrate distribution. Man is also responsible for the distribution of a fraction of West Indian herpetofauna.

Michel Breuil
Laboratoire Amphibiens-Reptiles
Museum national d'Histoire naturelle
25 rue Cuvier
75005 Paris
E-mail: mabreuil@club-internet.fr

1. Censky E. J., Hodge K & Dudley J. *Nature* 395, 556 (1998)
2. Moberly W.R., *Comp. Bioch. Physiol.* 27, 21-32 (1968)
3. Lazell J. D. *Bull. Mus. Comp. Zool.* 145, 1-28 (1973)
4. Pagney Bénito-Espinal F. in Hugo genèse, Incidences éographiques et Écologiques sur la Gudeloupe. (Pagney Bénito-Espinal F. & Bénito-Espinal E.) 19-75 (Parc National de la Guadeloupe, 1991)

Help us to keep you informed.

Send us your e-mail address so we can keep you up-to-date on I.I.S. news and events. We'll also be able to let you know when to look for a new issue of *Iguana Times* in your mailbox.

Send your e-mail address,
along with your name and
street address to:
Lizard1@aol.com