

Ctenosaurs of West Hartford

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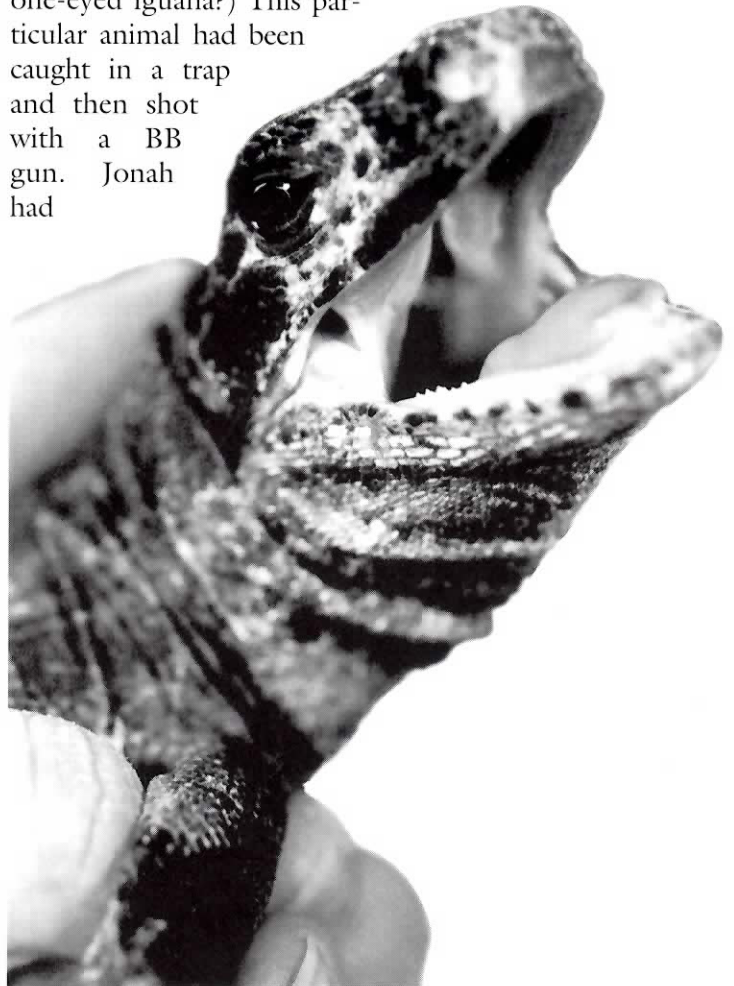
The past two issues of the *Iguana Times* have contained items in the Newsbriefs column about the spiny-tailed iguanas, *Ctenosaura pectinata*, on Gasparilla Island off the west coast of Florida. Apparently as many as 2,000 *pectinata* live on the island, descended from pet animals released 20 or 30 years ago. They have come to be regarded as pests by the locals, who prefer to preserve their ornamental shrubs, and have resorted to exterminating the iguanas using a variety of inhumane methods. I had heard about a young man named Jonah Coppick who was rescuing *Ctenosaurs* on Gasparilla and relocating them to private homes. I managed to contact Jonah, but had to wait out the winter while the *Ctenosaurs* apparently hibernated in burrows with the gopher tortoises. I was determined, however, to work with this species and see just how adaptable they might be to captivity in the Northeast.

My previous experience with spiny-tailed iguanas had been with *Ctenosaura similis*, a species more commonly available in the pet trade in North America, although the *pectinata* are more common in Europe. My first *similis* was a spunky female named Spinoza, who was famous for Houdini-like escapes from her enclosure. On one memorable occasion, she had slipped under the kitchen stove and gotten herself stuck half-in, half-out, of a small opening on the underside of that appliance. The appliance repair people just couldn't get enough of the 911 pet rescue jokes. With all the laughs I provided them I think they could have charged me just a bit less than \$180 to disassemble the stove so that I could retrieve my lost lizard. Spinoza lived for 3 years, always feisty and always willing to draw blood at any opportunity, but she was also a picky eater, refusing any greens and eating only crickets.

During the I.I.S. conference in Belize, many of us had the privilege of seeing the *similis* in its home territory. They are wily, wary animals, always on the lookout for an escape route. While the green iguanas are eaten in Belize, the *Ctenosaurs* are not. This may be in part due to superstition, but I imagine it also has something to do with the fact that they can be quite fierce and they are just not as easy to catch! Nevertheless, after returning

from Belize, I happily adopted another *Ctenosaura similis*. Ctolemy is a male spiny tail who came to me in good health and with a good appetite, consuming crickets, superworms, and waxworms as well as all types of greens. He is a handsome animal who has grown well and, although he is much less skittish than when I first adopted him, I would still describe him as extremely wary, always ready to bolt or bite at any opportunity.

In the summer of 2000, I finally received a call from Jonah. He had four *pectinata* for me — including one particular female who he knew I would want because she only had one eye. (How is it that people can tell that I'm the sort who would want a one-eyed iguana?) This particular animal had been caught in a trap and then shot with a BB gun. Jonah had



Toricelli, one of four rescued *Ctenosaura pectinata*, displays her rostral abrasion and good eye. Photograph: Robert Cerda



Ctolemy, a healthy male *Ctenosaura similis*, displaying striking coloration and impressive dorsal spines. Photograph: Robert Cerda

taken her to his veterinarian, nursed her through a course of antibiotics and now she was ready for a home. Well, maybe not. She managed to escape from her enclosure shortly after I first heard about her, and then would reappear in Jonah's yard from time to time over the course of the summer. Finally, in the fall, she just showed up back in the enclosure from which she had originally escaped and Jonah quickly packed her up along with four others and mailed them to me overnight.


Given my previous experience, I was astonished to find these animals to be much easier to handle than the *similis*. I had received three females and one male who were all between 250-300 g in weight and 48-66 cm in length, plus one near-hatchling who had already lost and regrown his tail. The smallest animal was the healthiest. He was a hearty eater and must have at least doubled his bulk, if not his length, in the four weeks before he disappeared from his "foolproof" enclosure. I can only hope that he has found the equivalent of a tortoise burrow somewhere in my house. The others had a variety of health problems including mites, rostral abrasions, damaged digits and, I assumed, intestinal parasites. They were all routinely treated with Fenbendazole for the parasites and three of the four were given antibiotics for what appeared to be systemic infection, as they had multiple lesions. Jonah had suggested that I feed them canned monitor food at first, but I found that they would only eat this when force-fed. None of the animals, other than the hatchling, seemed interested in insects either, but all have adapted to the



Gabriella, a female *Ctenosaura pectinata*, has a low, spined dorsal ridge and peach colored highlights on her back and underbelly. Photograph: Robert Cerda

same diet of fresh greens and vegetables that I use for my green iguanas and *Cyclura*.

At this point, several months later, two of the four remaining *Ctenosaurs* are thriving. The male, Galois, and the female, Gabriella, are quite plump and always bask together. Toricelli, my one-eyed female, continues to have problems with infection in her extremities and she remains extremely shy about basking with the others. I had originally placed her by herself thinking that she would be less able to compete for food due to her disability. She has, however, gained weight and become more active since joining the group, spending most of her time with Maxine. Maxine is the longest of the animals, but she was extremely thin when she arrived and had lesions over much of her body, which is probably why she has been so slow to gain weight. All of them are now shedding which is usually a sign of recovering health.

The *pectinata* are not as dramatically colored as the *similis*, but are nevertheless quite attractive with varying patterns of brown and peach-colored details. Temperamentally, although skittish, they seem more adaptable than the *similis* and much less ill-tempered. On the whole, though, I can't recommend them to the general hobbyist. No wild-caught animal is going to have an easy time adapting to captivity and these animals are easily traumatized due to their high-strung nature. They also find the constant handling for administration of oral and injectable medication quite stressful. Under the circumstances, I think that the difficulty of adapting them to captivity can only be viewed as acceptable to them given the alternative with which they are faced. 

Special thanks to Mary Ann Huntington, whose generous donation helped pay for veterinary care for the CT *Ctenosaurs* and many others.