

Married to an Iguanophile

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The kitchen radio was playing “Sheherazade” the night we operated on Bradbury. A year before we adopted him, Bradbury the Green Iguana had been taken to a clinic for treatment of a broken leg and the veterinarian had set the leg backwards! Emaciation and advanced metabolic bone disease left him “slithering” rather than walking, and he appeared even more awkward with his leg flopping backwards. Bradbury also had a substantial growth in his neck that appeared to be increasing in size. That evening, we extracted a grayish mass weighing about 40 g. A surreal scene, but not at all uncommon in our rather unusual household.

I am an emergency physician, who in another time might have been a simple country doctor. Instead, I work in a busy inner-city hospital ministering to victims of HIV, gunshot wounds, and sexual assault, or patients trying to die from heart attacks or emphysema. I sometimes ask myself why I don’t lead a more conventional life, especially when I consider the already prodigious challenges of my chosen vocation.

My wife, AJ, is better known to readers of the *Iguana Times* as the secretary of the International Iguana Society. To me, she is both a soul mate and a challenge, a woman who is driven by her reptophilia. While I often complain about my wife’s inclinations and the resultant impositions on my family and my life, I must admit that I was the author of the strange life we live.

I met AJ in London, Ontario, where I attended University. Our second date began with a motorcycle ride to Niagara Falls and has yet to end. Through two human “hatchlings,” five different cities, and eight

different houses, AJ kept our home impeccably, licked my wounds when the inequities of dealing with the less savory elements of my profession inflicted damage, and nurtured our children. We finally arrived in West Hartford, Connecticut where we acquired our first iguana, a birthday present for AJ. She had always been fascinated with animals and had kept a small menagerie for years. Although these pets were part of our life, they were not the center of our world — but that changed when trouble hit the Gutman household.

Both children were now at school and AJ spent her days maintaining the house. I felt that she was descending into a deep depression and that she needed a goal in her life. This was the logotherapy approach to depression (logotherapy, a school of thought articulated by Holocaust survivor, Dr. Victor Frankel, states that the key to psychological health is having a sense of purpose). AJ took me at my word — but what that goal and purpose would be I could hardly have imagined.

To cheer her and amuse ourselves, we acquired several more Green Iguanas, two of which were rescued animals. The wife of a colleague, a photojournalist, was intrigued by our animals and asked to take some pictures for a newspaper article. Thus AJ was featured rather prominently in the *Northeast Magazine*, a weekend supplement to the



These two animals are both at least three years old and severely stunted. Flitwick (left) has scarring on his underside from severe hotrock burns, but has adult proportions and no apparent skeletal deformities. Velikovskiy (right) retains very juvenile proportions and has a deformed jaw, a healed spinal fracture and obvious fibrous osteodystrophy of the rear limbs.
Photograph by Carole Saucier.

local newspaper. During the interview, the author asked AJ what she foresaw for herself and the iguanas five years into the future. My guileless AJ told him that she hoped to establish a proper iguana sanctuary for abused and unwanted animals. The author not only published her dreams but our phone number. Our phone hasn't stopped ringing since.



Bradbury has recovered well from his surgery and is thriving despite multiple disabilities. *Photograph by Carole Saucier.*

Little did AJ or I realize the dimensions of the abused and abandoned iguana problem. Huge numbers of cute, six-inch-long Green Iguanas are bought every year in pet stores for \$5–20. However, when they reach three feet or become aggressive, all but a small minority of owners grow weary of them, and seek to dispose of the green monsters. The Society for Protection of Cruelty to Animals includes only “warm-blooded” vertebrates in its mandate. Veterinarians charge around \$60 to euthanize them.

We started filling our house with these wayward creatures. Many were ill and had been abused. Both of us became educated in their care and treatment, AJ much more than I. Once the veterinary bills started to mount, however, I bought a textbook on reptilian medicine and surgery. To cut costs (but also because I liked the challenge), I began performing the surgical procedures. We became quite adept at fixing prolapsed cloacae, incising and draining abscesses, and suturing lacerations.

Early on, on our kitchen table, I performed a Cesarean section on an egg-bound female that was also quite malnourished. It was quite a bizarre

“That’s not a Komodo Dragon, is it?” Grendel is actually a Blue-Tailed Monitor (*Varanus doreanus*) who enjoys basking in a companionable heap with the iguanas. *Photograph by Carole Saucier.*



Bronte is one of several animals in the house who are between 15 and 20 years old. *Photograph by Carole Saucier.*

scene as we sat down to dinner with AJ ventilating this poor animal with a pediatric bag valve as it recovered from the anesthetic. Unfortunately, although the animal regained consciousness and began to breathe spontaneously, we found her dead in her enclosure the next morning.

Bradbury, who recovered from surgery and is presently terrorizing the other iguanas, was only one of the many that were to follow. We experienced many successes and some failures. Phone calls about unwanted animals continued to come (in ever-increasing numbers), and our home began filling with Green Iguanas. First four, then 12, then 20, and then 30 iguanas of varying sizes were running around our house. To keep them warm and maintain their health, we installed a number of rather expensive UV heat lamps. As one might imagine, our electric bills are quite high.

These animals had to be fed and cleaned. Only Noah would appreciate the cleaning effort, but feeding is also a huge production that requires up to four hours each day. The bills, the effort, and the time invested continued to mount as ever more animals accumulated. Potential visitors with phobias about reptiles would politely, and sometimes not so politely, beg off any invitation. AJ would say, "Well, if they don't like the animals, they're not welcome."

My wife had been transformed into a driven animal rescuer who was making me crazy with the increasing frustrations and costs of her new passion. I begged her to stop adopting Green Iguanas. Ever agreeable, she instead started to acquire different species of iguanas, other lizards, birds, turtles, tortoises, and frogs. We now have two Prehensile-tailed Skinks living in the breadbox in our kitchen and tree frogs in the kitchen window. Eight assorted ctenosaurs, two Rhinoceros



Asimov was previously featured (*IT* 7(3)).
Photograph by Carole Saucier.



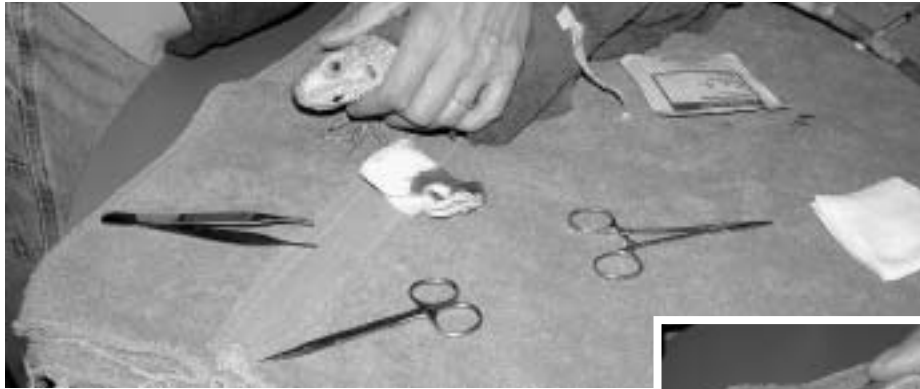
This group was temporarily displaced while UV-penetrable skylights were installed in their room; top to bottom: Hemingway, Bunny, Castro, Kahlo, and Dante. Photograph by Carole Saucier.



Neelix, a five-year old Rhinoceros Iguana (*Cyclura cornuta*), is a favorite with everyone who visits the Gutman house.
Photograph by Carole Saucier.

Iguanas, and three Cuban Iguanas coexist uneasily. Why at least two of each? One would suffer from loneliness, of course.


Among the shelled inhabitants of our home, we have a tiny Sulcata Tortoise with a deformed shell. What I wasn't told when we adopted the little fellow is that Sulcatas grow to 150 pounds. AJ claims that it would be unfair to keep him indoors as he grows — so we will eventually have to move



The Gutman kitchen table has served as an operating table for many a procedure. Here, Eurydice is having an abscess removed from her lower jaw. *Photographs by Carole Saucier.*

to Florida. I also discovered incidentally that Red Tegus can reach thirty pounds — after we adopted a second one (we had to take him; he had only one eye). And that slinky fellow with the darting tongue that patrols the house every morning couldn't really be a Komodo Dragon, could it?

Life with AJ, however, is not all iguana guano. She has become an important part of the International Iguana Society and regularly corresponds with people all over the world on iguana-related matters. She has just finished translating parts of a book series on the reptiles and amphibians of Central America from German to English. She also has been a behind-the-scenes guest at a number of important zoos — but, unlike Sharon Stone's husband, AJ comes away with her digits intact.

Although I am frustrated and at times just plain angry at how AJ's activities constrain my life, there is never a lack of adventure. The iguanas and I are truly blessed to have her on our side. 



The table is more commonly used for food preparation. Peanut, the Umbrella Cockatoo, ensures quality control as bowls are filled for all the herbivores. *Photograph by AJ Gutman.*



Iguanas of several species enjoy basking together in front of a specially installed UV-penetrable plexiglas pane; from left: Zelda, Voltaire, Guinevere, Merlin, Asimov, and Odessa. *Photograph by AJ Gutman.*