UF IFAS Extension UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

UF/IFAS PEER REVIEWED WEC414
doi.org/10.32473/EDIS-UW459-2019

Large Lizard Lineup for South Florida[1]

Justin R. Dalaba and Frank J. Mazzotti[2]

Introduction

Species of nonnative reptiles breeding in Florida currently outnumber native species. This imbalance is illustrated by the fact that the four largest lizards breeding in Florida are from Africa, South America, Central America, and Mexico.

This fact sheet serves as a guide to several commonly confused species. The large lizards described here are invasive in south Florida, arriving through the pet trade. Tegus, monitors, and spiny-tailed iguanas are diet generalists and opportunistic feeders, consuming various native fruits, insects, small reptiles, and occasionally small mammals and birds. Tegus and monitors have an affinity for eggs, making them a threat to ground-nesting birds and reptiles, including threatened and endangered species such as American crocodiles, burrowing owls, shorebirds, and sea turtles. Green iguanas are a pest in suburban areas and may harm native plants and animals in natural areas, however their biggest threat is to infrastructure such as seawalls and levees, which they damage by burrowing into and under them. Preventing these lizards from spreading into vulnerable natural areas will save time and money down the road.

Use this guide to correctly identify large-bodied lizards and **immediately report sightings of monitors and tegus to 888-IVE-GOT1**. Because they are very widespread, green iguanas are not necessary to report. Additional information on removing nuisance iguanas from your property is included in this fact sheet.

Even if you are not sure what something is, it is important to take a photo of any suspicious-looking lizard and report it to EDDMapS. Reporting helps managers understand existing threats and may even help prevent the establishment of a new invader.



Figure 1. Large adult Nile monitor (*Varanus niloticus*) from Palm Beach County. Credit: Nick Scobel, UF



Figure 2. Adult Argentine black and white tegu (*Salvator merianae*) from south Florida. Credit: Robin Bijlani, UF



Figure 3. Adult green iguana *(Iguana iguana*) from south Florida. Credit: Justin Dalaba, UF

Tegus

Three tegu species have been found in south Florida. Argentine black and white tegus (*Salvator merianae*) are breeding in Miami-Dade County and Hillsborough County. Their core population is centered in Florida City and is spreading. Evidence suggests gold tegus (*Tupinambis teguixin*) are also reproducing in the wild in Miami-Dade County. Red tegus (*Salvator rufescens*) have been found in south Florida, but with no evidence of breeding. Tegus spend most of their time on land and are often observed on roadsides or disturbed areas.



Figure 4. Argentine black and white tegu (*Salvator merianae*)—adult size over 4 feet. Hatchlings have bright green heads, which fade after the first month. Credit: Robin Bijlani and Justin Dalaba, UF



Figure 5. Gold tegu (*Tupinambis teguixin*)—average adult size 2–3 feet. Credit: Florida Museum of Natural History



Figure 6. Red tegu (*Salvator rufescens*)—adult size over 4 feet. Credit: Joseph Wasilewski

Monitors

Several species of monitor lizards have been found in south Florida. Nile monitors (*Varanus niloticus*) have localized breeding populations in Palm Beach and Lee counties and are often reported in Miami-Dade and Broward counties. Other species, such as the Asian water monitor (*Varanus salvator*) and savannah monitor (*Varanus exanthematicus*) have been found in south Florida but are not known to be breeding. These semi-aquatic lizards prefer to be near water, like the C-51 canal in Palm Beach County. Their long, rudder-like tails and sharp claws enable them to traverse both wet and dry habitat with ease.



Figure 7. Nile monitor (*Varanus niloticus*)—adult size up to 7 feet. Credit: Bill Bayless



Figure 8. Asian water monitor (*Varanus salvator*)—adult size over 8 feet. Credit: Ashley Lawrence, FWC



Figure 9. Savannah monitor (*Varanus exanthematicus*)—average adult size 2–3 feet. Credit: EDDMapS

Iguanas

Green iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) are the most widely established large nonnative lizards in Florida. Two other iguana species can be found in several populations throughout Florida: black spiny-tailed (*Ctenosaura similis*) and Mexican spiny-tailed iguanas (*Ctenosaura pectinata*). Iguanas are often confused with monitors and tegus due to their large size. They are frequently observed in rocky habitat and along canals or in urban areas. While green iguanas prefer to eat fruits and vegetation, spiny-tailed iguanas tend to be omnivorous, posing more of an immediate threat to native wildlife.



Figure 10. Spiny-tailed iguana (*Ctenosaura* spp.)—adult size 2–4 feet. Credit: UF



Figure 11. Green iguana (*Iguana iguana*)—adult size 4–6 feet. Credit: UF



Figure 12. Male green iguana (*Iguana iguana*) displaying breeding colors.
Credit: Florida Museum of Natural History

How to Report

Report sightings of monitors and tegus:

1. Take a photo
2. Note the location
3. Call 888-IVE-GOT-1 or report online at Ivegot1.org

For information on removing nuisance iguanas from your property, visit:

- ENY-714: Dealing with Iguanas in the South Florida Landscape
- Green Iguana | FWCC

For additional information on invasive species and reporting, visit: Evergladescisma.org

For More Information Contact

Frank J. Mazzotti

UF/IFAS Fort Lauderdale Research and Education Center

3205 College Ave., Davie, FL 33314

Email: fjma@ufl.edu

https://crocdoc.ifas.ufl.edu

[1] This document is WEC414, one of a series of the UF/IFAS Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation. Original publication date July 2019. Visit the Ask IFAS website at https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu for the currently supported version of this publication. © 2026 UF/IFAS. This publication is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

[2] Justin R. Dalaba, former science writer and outreach coordinator, UF/IFAS Ft. Lauderdale Research and Education Center; Frank J. Mazzotti, professor, Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, UF/IFAS Fort Lauderdale Research and Education Center, Fort Lauderdale, FL; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information, and other services only to individuals and institutions that operate in compliance with applicable federal and state non-discrimination laws and policies. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county's UF/IFAS Extension office. U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A&M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Andra Johnson, Dean for UF/IFAS Extension.