

Meet the Family Iguanidae

Green iguanas and their kin.

October 21, 2009

[Click image to enlarge](#)

This spiny-tailed iguana was one of several seen at the Pueblo Bonita condo complex in Mazatlan.

In the past I've mentioned how co-workers will sometimes show me photos of reptiles they've encountered, asking me to identify what type they were. This just happened again today. Melissa Kauffman, an editorial director here at BowTie Inc., recently traveled to Mazatlan. Does that give you a hint as to the reptile in the photo she showed me? Well, if not, all you need to do is look at the photo that accompanies this blog, which was taken by Melissa with her camera phone. Actually, she had several photos of spiny-tailed iguanas. She said they were common around Pueblo Bonita, the condo complex where she and her husband were vacationing.

When someone says "iguana," the image that generally leaps to most people's minds is the green iguana. And rightly so...over the years Iguana iguana has often been referred to as the lizard king. It really did help nurture a growing interest in the keeping of pet reptiles a few decades ago. Unfortunately for green iguanas, this led to many hatchlings being purchased on impulse and dying early deaths. The green iguana was frequently considered a good beginner lizard, probably simply because it was so prevalent in pet stores, but it is far from a wise choice for a novice. Green iguanas can get pretty big and burly. Males can also get somewhat belligerent. Therefore, in more recent years, REPTILES magazine and other reptile industry figures have tried to convey that green iguanas are very much best left to expert reptile owners who can provide them with the special care considerations that they need to thrive (most notably a very large enclosure).

Iguanias will always hold a special place in the hearts of many reptile hobbyists. There's something that's so regal about them. Green iguanas look so cool, especially males with large dorsal spines and big 'ol dewlaps. Cyclura iguanas, also known as rock iguanas -- what can I say? They are ultra cool. Sadly, several majestic and beautiful Cyclura species -- the Grand Cayman blue iguana (*C. lewisi*), Andros Island iguana (*C. cyclura cyclura*) and Ricord's iguana (*C. ricordi*), to name three, are critically endangered or threatened. If you would like to find out how you can help these lizards, as well as other reptile conservation programs, visit the website of the International Reptile Conservation Foundation at www.ircf.org.

Some *Cyclura* are available as pets, with the rhinoceros iguana (*C. cornuta*) and the Cuban iguana (*C. nubila*) probably the most commonly encountered. I once had a young Cuban for a short time, but it died only about a month after I got it. I didn't have a necropsy performed, so I never did find out what killed that lizard. It was plump and fed well, and I was providing the proper captive habitat in regard to temperature, etc., but one morning it was simply dead. That was a heartbreaker. A friend who had another from the same clutch experienced the same thing. This is an example of why you should consider taking new acquisitions to a reptile veterinarian soon after you bring them home. That Cuban I had must have had something going on inside its body that was not evident on the outside -- reptiles do mask illness as a survival technique -- and I might have been alerted to a problem and been able to save the lizard had I taken it to a vet. I think about it every time I see a nice fat lewisi at a reptile expo, when I see what that lizard might have become.

Talk about regal lizards, how can you not think of a rhino iguana? Big, bulky and with those nasal projections, how much more imposing can you get, lizardwise? I had a friend who had a pretty aggressive rhino iguana. That lizard was definitely a display animal and not one to cuddle. Its claws could double as can openers. True, the color of a rhino iguana may leave something to be desired, since we're talking about your basic gray lizard. But what *C. cornuta* lacks in color it makes up for in facial features. Rhino Iguana Article>>

Since I'm on the subject of iguanas, I'll again mention one of my all-time favorite lizards, the desert iguana (*Dipsosaurus dorsalis*). You can read my previous blog about this attractive lizard here.

And what about marine iguanas? I've never been to the Galapagos Islands, but these guys are one of the major reasons I want to get myself onto them someday. The marine iguana (*Amblyrhynchus cristatus*) is definitely one of the more prehistoric-looking lizards that I can think of. How cool would it be to be able to watch some marine iguanas swimming in the ocean, propelling themselves with their tails while foraging for algae? I've seen such sights on film, but to see that in person would be a highlight of any reptile fan's life. Also on the wish list would be to see the large colonies of marine iguanas scampering over the rocks on land.

If you got tired of watching marine iguanas you could always turn your attention to the other Galapagos iguana species, the land iguana (*Conolophus subcristatus*). Or the tortoises, of course. Geez...I've got to get to the Galapagos Islands one of these days!

For sheer beauty I have three words for you: Fiji banded iguana (*Brachylophus fasciatus*). While the Fiji crested iguana (*B. vitiensis*) is also attractive, *B. fasciatus* is a mind blower. Many hobbyists look forward to the day when this lizard is widely available in the pet trade. That day is not here yet, but maybe this lizard will be bred more widely someday. I remember the first time I saw a Fiji banded iguana. It was at the San Diego Zoo. I was perusing the reptile enclosures and there it was. Once you see one of these guys, the banded green and turquoise coloration, streamlined head and calm eyes will always be with you.

And what about the iguana that started this blog, the spiny-tailed iguana? There are many *Ctenosaura* species, more than any other iguana genus. Spiny tails are fairly commonly encountered in the pet trade; I see some at pretty much every reptile expo I attend (at least I think I do). They can be really fast runners, so if you encounter one while traveling in the Yucatan you would have to be pretty quick on your feet to chase it down and catch it. Keep this in mind, too, if you have a pet spiny tail and decide to take it outside for some fresh air and sunshine.

And with that, I think I've touched on every genus in the family Iguanidae, except *Sauromalus*. But it's the end of the day, and I have to catch a flight tonight, so I think I'll leave the chuckwalla for another day.

[Back to Blogs>>](#)