

## Some Past Lizard Pets

By Russ Case

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REPTILES editor Russ Case sits with his green iguana Yombo. While I may not be able to respond to all questions in a timely, one-on-one manner, I will attempt to answer any questions people post as comments in subsequent "Random Neural Firings" blogs. Joshua and Eric have asked about animals I've kept, and which ones I had good experiences with, (as well as any that resulted in not-so-great experiences). Because Joshua asked about lizards specifically, I'll focus on those in this week's blog.

Like many young herpers the first lizard I ever kept as a pet was the common green anole. While I'm settled in California now, I lived in New Jersey until I was 9, and so it was New Jersey reptiles and amphibians that sparked my interest in herps. Now, as this is New Jersey I'm talking about, let's face it, the state is not exactly a hotbed of lizard activity. The northern fence lizard, five-lined skink and ground skink are about the only lizards you may happen upon in the Garden State, and frankly I don't remember ever finding any. The most prominent herps I remember finding were bullfrogs -- lots and lots of bullfrogs. While bullfrogs were prevalent, there were also garter snakes, salamanders, and the occasional special discovery of an eastern box turtle.

Anyway, I wasn't used to seeing lizards in the local woods so imagine my delight when I came across green anoles in a local pet shop. Green lizards, cool! Soon I had one, and nearly as soon afterward I lost one, providing an early lesson in secure herp containment. I did find my escaped anole -- it's probably about 40 years ago now, but I still remember this distinctly. The anole was in the basement, curled around the ridge of a tabletop lamp. My parents still own that lamp, and whenever I see it I remember the "anole incident."

So it was primarily anoles for me in my earliest herpkeeping days. Then, in 1970 I moved to California, entered a pet shop, and there was a desert iguana, looking very regal. I had to have that lizard and thus a desert iguana became my first other-than-anole lizard pet. I named him Iguanodon (after a favorite dinosaur). I had Iguanodon for a few years -- he even moved to Michigan with my family for several months before we returned to California.

I don't remember Iguanodon as being difficult to care for. He readily ate veggies and insects and spent a lot of time basking under his heat source. But even so, he died sooner than he would have if I had had access to the products and knowledge today's herpers have. I used a standard incandescent light bulb to heat him. He received no calcium supplementation, full-spectrum lighting or anything like that. I'm not sure today how long I had him, but in the grand scheme of things it wasn't long.

In regard to Josh and Eric's question of which provided the best experiences and which were difficult to care for, I'll say one of my green iguanas (named Yombo), bearded dragons and an Argentine tegu remain favorites. Yombo was your typical male iguana, looking all spiny and majestic as he reclined on his favorite branch. He would get a bit grumpy during breeding season, like many iguanas. He was more orange than green at these times, and I got whipped upside the head by his tail on occasion. Of course, I would not recommend green iguanas for beginners or anyone who doesn't have a lot of space and who knows what they're getting into. But for people who can give them the proper care they're ultra cool.

Bearded dragons are irresistible. Mine, like many, exhibited personality-plus, the way they would watch you and beg for food. When they would visit, my parents loved watching the feeding frenzy that would result when the bearded dragons were given their live crickets. The tegu, meanwhile, was fun to watch when he was given a raw egg in his food dish. He'd amble over to the dish, stick his nose in, and out would come the long pink tongue, over and over, to lap up the gooey egg.

I've kept many other types of lizards, but of them all, it should come as no surprise that the bearded dragons were the hardiest and easiest to care for. Leopard geckos are pretty easy, too, but remember that they're nocturnal. Nighttime lights enabled me to watch my leopards at night, and that's pretty fun, too.

As for unfortunate experiences, two come to mind. I tried keeping a collared lizard once, but it never thrived and

withered away. This again I am sure is because of my lack of knowledge. Then there was the time someone asked me if I wanted a Jackson's chameleon. I was told it was sick and that I could have it for free if I wanted it. Of course chameleons held a special fascination for me, even though I had never kept one, so I took the chameleon. It was at death's door when I received it, and it was dead the next day. So that wasn't great. The most unexpected and heartbreaking death of a lizard involved a Cuban rock iguana I had for a short time. It was a beautiful lizard, a young one. To this day I have no idea what happened. It was fine one day – at least it appeared to be fine – and dead the next. I did not have a necropsy (animal autopsy) performed on it, so its death remains a mystery. A friend had one from the same clutch and the same thing happened to his.

The vast majority of my lizard experiences have been positive, and lizards remain a favorite of mine. You've probably heard that bearded dragons and leopard geckos are great beginner reptiles and I would definitely agree. If you're a beginner you could start with those and move on up to more advanced reptiles as you gain experience. If you're a veteran lizardkeeper, perhaps a collared lizard or Jackson's chameleon is in order. Just don't do what I did and purposely take on a sick animal. While your heart may be in the right place in thinking that you may be able to make the animal well, taking on a sick animal can be problematic and possibly costly. Always start out with the healthiest animals. Your job after that is to keep them healthy.

There are some lizards I have never kept, which I think would be fun to give a shot someday. A blue-tongued skink is one. Most of the specimens I've handled were so mellow, and of course their tongues add to their appeal. Of course chameleons still hold that special fascination, especially a beautiful panther or veiled – but next time I'll get the healthiest one I can find! Or maybe a uromastyx...or a red tegu this time...or....

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