

**"Have you heard about the Iguanidae? Well,  
let's just keep it in the family..."**

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*Iguana iguana* is just one of several spectacular members of the lizard family *Iguanidae*, a grouping that currently consists of eight genera. Before 1989 the family was considered much larger, then encompassing approximately 54 genera and over 546 species. Systematists, however, could not find any consistent, shared characteristics that could adequately distinguish the entire group from other recognized lizard families such as the Old World Chamaeleonidae and Agamidae. Because of that fact, two researchers, Darrel Frost and Richard Etheridge, set about in 1989 to conduct a comprehensive morphological analysis and re-examination of the entire group. Their published findings redefined the family Iguanidae to include just eight genera, all of which were closely related and shared many common characteristics. It is these eight genera that are the subject of this discussion, a brief overview of the lizard family Iguanidae.

Approaching the genera in alphabetical order, we come first to *Amblyrhynchus*, the Galapagos Island Marine Iguanas. This iguana has the distinction of being the only true marine going lizard, having adapted to living on the rocky, volcanic coast of these islands and feeding almost exclusively on marine algae. Female and young marine iguanas forage primarily on exposed rocks at low tide but adult males feed underwater on the submerged algae. Only one species, *A. cristatus*, is recognized, with seven valid subspecies found on the different individual islands.

Adult males of the several isolated island races vary widely in size with snout to vent length (SVL) from about 12" to 19.3", and in weight from as little as 1.1 lbs. up to as much as 22 lbs.

Next is the genus *Brachylophus*, the South Pacific Banded and Crested Iguanas. These are the only members of the *Iguanidae* which are not restricted to the Americas. These beautiful iguanas are native to several islands in the Fiji and Tonga Island groups in the South Pacific, thousands of miles from their nearest relatives in Central and South America. Most scientists believe that their ancestors arrived on floating mats of vegetation which washed out to sea following storms on the American mainland. This genus has just two recognized species. *B. faggiatus*, the South Pacific Banded Iguana, has the wider distribution of the two, being native to several dozen islands in both the Fiji and Tonga groups, and it has also been recently introduced onto additional islands in Tonga and onto a single island in the New Hebrides. The second species is *B. vitiensis*, commonly named the Fijian Crested Iguana. It is known only from several northern islands in the Fiji group, an area that is relatively drier than other islands to the south. C.I.T.E.S. lists both species on Appendix I.

Jumping back to the Galapagos Islands, we now come to the next genus in order, *Conolophus*. These are the endemic Galapagos Land Iguanas, of which two species are recognized. The first is *C. pallidus*, known only from the single island of Santa Fe (also called Barrington). The second species is found on at least six of the major Galapagos Islands and is named *C. subcristatus*. Populations on several islands have, unfortunately, been exterminated by both man and by introduced, and now

feral, animals in recent years. There is a substantial difference in the adult size of *C. subcristatus* depending upon which island they are found. The largest males are on North Seymour (Baltra) where they can weigh as much as 26 lbs. The smallest adults are on Plazas where they rarely exceed 11 lbs. Females on each island average only about 1/3 to 1/2 the weight of the males. Males are often more brightly colored than the straw-colored females and can show bright yellow and orange coloration seasonally. This is also one of the longer lived of the iguanas with a life expectancy of at least 20 to 40 years. Both species appear on Appendix II of C.I.T.E.S.

Our next group of iguanas is the genus *Ctenosaura*, one of the largest, most diverse, and least known genera within the family Iguanidae. These are commonly called the Mexican and Central American spiny-tailed iguanas. The genus has undergone several revisions, additions, and upgrades in recent years and it is now considered to include at least 17 species with numerous sub-species. Several species within the current group were once listed in another genus, *Enyaliosaurus*, but most systematists have listed those species back within *Ctenosaura* for at least the last twenty years or more. Some species, including *C. acanthura*, *C. pectinata*, and *C. similis* attain a large adult size and have quite a large distribution over much of southern Mexico and Central America. Others including *C. defensor* and *C. clarki* are much smaller in size with much more limited distribution. Several members of the group are limited in range to just one or two small valleys in Mexico or Central America, or to a single island. This is one of the least studied genera of the Iguanidae and I expect that following addition

research there are likely to be future changes in current classifications and nomenclature.

The next genera, *Cyclura*, contain not just some of the rarest iguanas, but some of the most Critically Endangered animal species on Earth. These are commonly known as the West Indian rhinoceros and rock iguanas. The eight or nine species are quite diverse in size and coloration. The Grand Cayman iguana, *C. n. lewisi*, can be sky-blue at times, the San Salvador iguana, *C. r. rileyi*, may have areas of brilliant yellow or orange on it's head and body, while the rhinoceros iguana, *C. cornuta*, is slate-gray or blue-gray in color with enlarged scales on it's snout that actually look like horns! Of the sixteen extant taxa currently recognized, eight are considered Critically Endangered, five are Endangered, and the remaining four are considered Vulnerable, according to the 1996 IUCN Red List. All iguanas within this genera are listed on C.I.T.E.S Appendix I. These iguanas are all restricted to islands in the West Indies, an area that has suffered one of the highest rates of extinction of any place on Earth! It is now estimated that six of the sixteen taxa of *Cyclura* iguanas have remaining worldwide populations of less than 500 individuals, with three of those having fewer than 200 remaining!

We come now to the first of only two genera of iguanas that are actually native to the United States. The desert iguana, *Dipsosaurus*, is the smallest member of the Iguanidae at about 14" in overall length as an adult, but that still makes it one of the largest U.S. lizards. These beautiful, delicate looking iguanas have a tan to cream background color with rows of maroon or brown spots down their dorsal surface which also sports a low crest. They are found only in the Southwestern United States,

in Northwestern Mexico and the peninsula of Baja California, and on several islands in the Gulf of California. These iguanas are most at home in the dry, sandy areas of flat desert although they have been found up to about 4000 feet in elevation in some areas. Their range is closely connected with that of the creosote bush which is a staple in their diet along with various grasses and other seasonal vegetation. Often the area around their mouth is stained bright yellow or orange from the creosote flowers that they consume. Two species are currently recognized, *D. dorsalis*, with three (or sometimes four, depending upon the authority cited) sub-species, and *D. catalinensis*, which is found only on a single island in the Gulf of California, Mexico. Desert iguanas are quite common within their range and can make good captives if cared for properly.

We have arrived once again with the best know of all Iguanidae genera, *Iguana*, or the green iguanas. There are two recognized species within the genus. The one that we are all familiar with is *I. iguana*, the common green iguana. This very large species also has a very large distribution, from Sinaloa and Veracruz in Northern Mexico, southward through Central America and northeastern South America all the way to the Tropic Capricorn in Paraguay and southeastern Brazil. It also occurs on many islands and cays in the Caribbean and the Lesser Antilles. This is the longest member of the Iguanidae and some very large males will exceed six feet or more in length and may weigh over 15 pounds. The lesser known of the two species of green iguanas is *I. delicatissima*, or the Lesser Antillies iguana. It is found only on several islands in a portion of the Caribbean known as the Lesser Antilles, from Anguilla to Dominica

and Martinique. It is distinguishable from *I. iguana* in that it does not have the enlarged sub tympanic plate and normally lacks the dark barring on the tail. It also does not attain as large a size as *I. iguana* with males reaching about 7.7 pounds and gravid females about 5.72 pounds. Much less common than the "other" green iguana, it is listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN with an estimate of about 15,000 animals remaining. The entire genus is listed on C.I.T.E.S. Appendix II.

The final genera in the family Iguanidae is the second of the only two that are native to the United States. These are the chuckwallas, or chuckawallas, of the genus *Sauromalus*, the largest non-venomous lizard in the United States, second in size only to the venomous Gila Monster. The species found within the U.S., *S. ater* (formerly *obesus*), is a very stout, robust lizard that reaches about 15" in overall length. In fact, it's former scientific name means "fat, flat lizard" and it is the perfect body shape to live in and among the rocky outcroppings in the southwestern desert foothills. Although preferring different habitat than our other native iguana, *Dipsosaurus dorsalis*, their ranges overlap quite closely and both tend to parallel that of the creosote bush, a staple food for both. The taxonomy of the *Sauromalus* is currently under review, and there is apparently much disagreement and debate over the number of species and the nomenclature used, but recently literature lists about five species. Of special note are the insular giant races of chuckwallas found on several islands in the Gulf of California. Best known of these is *S. varis* which is known from just two small islands within the Gulf. Compared to most other chuckwallas it is a true "giant" reaching lengths of about

two feet and weights of over four pounds. The insular giant species, *S. varis*, is listed on C.I.T.E.S. Appendix I.