

Varanus albigularis

White-Throated Monitor

Class: Reptilia. **Order:** Squamata. **Family:** Varanus.

Other names: Cape Monitor, Rock Monitor and Southern Savanna Monitor



Physical Description:

Monitor lizards are generally large lizards recognized for their elongate bodies, strong limbs, muscular tails and robust claws. The white-throated monitor is the second largest monitor found in Africa, capable of growing to 6 feet in length and can weigh up to 25 lbs. The body base color is dark brown with a solid grey or brown head. Their throat much lighter, hence their common name. The body has a pattern of dark rosettes with a cream colored center that gradually merge with age to give the impression of bands around the ribcage. Their snout is distinctively blunt and bulbous, particularly in adults.

Diet in the Wild: Carnivorous; small reptiles, mammals, bird eggs and insects.

Diet in the Zoo: rats, mice, chicks

Habitat & Range: Grassland, scrub, and woodlands of South-Western, South-Central, and East Africa.

Life Span: 12-20 years

Perils in the wild: Habitat loss, hunted by humans, rats, birds of prey and large carnivores.

Physical Adaptations:

- Monitor lizards have forked tongues; they are the only reptile other than snakes to possess this characteristic. This allows for better accuracy in locating a prey's scent by use of their **Jacobson's organ** to detect chemical signals in their surroundings.
- Monitors are known to use their tail which can be twice as long as their body, as a rudder to steer while swimming, for grasping, and as a weapon.
- They will usually use their long, sharp claws to dig their own holes, but are known to use termite mounds and rodent dens to lay their eggs.
- They swallow their food whole or in large pieces and are able to dislocate their **hyoid bone** in order to enlarge their throat.

Behavioral Adaptations:

- The White-Throated Monitor will climb trees to avoid predators. If confronted by a predator on the ground, it will puff up its throat and body, lash out with its tail, and bite violently.
- Active throughout summer, except when temperatures are extremely high.
- Monitors may remain alert during the winter months but far less active and generally remaining in its overnight refuge, which is an earth burrow or hollow tree trunk.
- Terrestrial, but climbs in trees to hunt for prey, reproduce, and avoid predators.

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- They practice “open pursuit” hunting instead of stalking and ambushing. They are very fast, despite their massive size, because of their powerful leg muscles.
- Male monitors are very territorial, fighting any male they encounter. This often leaves severe bite wounds.
- **Diurnal** or day active.

Reproduction and Development:

- During breeding season, females will climb up into trees. Once a male locates a female, they will mate for 1-2 days before the male goes in search of another female.
- Females can lay two clutches a year, with up to 50 eggs a clutch.
- They are **oviparous**, reproduction in which the eggs are released by the female and development of the offspring occurs outside the maternal body.

Additional Information:

- There are three geographically separated subspecies of the white-throated monitor: *Varanus albigularis albigularis*; *V. a. angolensis*; and *V. a. microstictus*.
- Until 1989 the white-throated monitor and the savanna monitor were considered to be the same species.
- Monitors fill an important niche in their habitats, often being one of the only large land carnivores. Of the 31 species of monitors found throughout the world, 24 of them occur in areas without terrestrial, carnivorous mammals.

Conservation Connection: Lizards

Reptiles are important components of the food webs in most ecosystems. They fill a critical role both as predator and prey species. Herbivorous species can also be important seed dispersers, particularly on island habitats. Reptile species can also be useful to people, in some areas, they help control the numbers of serious agricultural pests by consuming rodent and insect pests.

Monitor lizards are often the dominant predator in an ecosystem. Most of the species are the predator in the environment which may be devoid of large mammalian predators.

Don't buy products, particularly when you're abroad, made from reptile skins such as handbags, boots made from snake or crocodile skin or jewelry made from tortoiseshell.

Conservation Status: IUCN—Least concern

Conservation Efforts: Targeted by humans for food & probably affected by habitat loss and fragmentation, however, still widespread and common.

Glossary: List of definitions of the most important recurrent technical terms used in the text.

diurnal – Active during the day.

Jacobson's organ- A pair of pit-like organs on the roof of the mouth that are lined with olfactory cells and nerves that interpret chemical stimuli in an animal's surroundings.

hyoid bone- A horseshoe shaped bone in the neck of many animals. Used support the tongue.

oviparity - Reproduction in which the eggs are released by the female; development of the offspring occurs outside the maternal body. Adj., oviparous

Sources:

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- Dudley Zoological Gardens. www.thedeep.kuvvi.net
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- Halliday, T. Adler, K. 1986. The Encyclopedia of Reptiles and Amphibians.