Varanus exanthematicus

Savannah Monitor

Class: Reptilia***. Order:*** Squamata***. Family:*** Varanidae.
Other names:

Physical Description: Monitor lizards are generally large lizards recognized for their elongate bodies, strong limbs, muscular tails and robust claws. The savannah monitor's base color is grey to light yellow, with symmetrical rows of circular, dark edged yellow spots across the animal's back and sides. The tail has alternating brown and yellowish bands. The belly and the undersides of their limbs are yellowish-grey or gray to black in color. They are

Diet in the Wild: Adult monitors are carnivorous and prey on a variety of animals. Prey includes arthropods such as beetles, centipedes, millipedes and scorpions. Larger prey are ground dwelling birds, small mammals, reptiles, toads, eggs and carrion. The monitors also feed on snails, and their teeth are blunted to crush the snail's shells and the back of the jaw provides maximum leverage to crush them as well.

Diet at the Zoo: Mealworms, hard-boiled eggs, mice, crickets.

Habitat & Range: The savannah monitor, as one would expect given the common name, is found in the savannahs and grasslands of central Africa. Its range extends throughout sub-Saharan Africa from Senegal east to Sudan and south almost to the Congo River and Rift Valley

Life Span: Approximately 8 -10 years in the wild and 15 to 20 years in captivity.

Perils in the wild: The main predators of Savannah Monitors are snakes, birds and people**.**

Physical Adaptations:

- Savannah monitor's teeth are blunted to crush the snail's shells and the back of the jaw provides maximum leverage to crush them as well.
- Savannah Monitor lizards are a stoutly built species with relatively short limbs and toes.
- Maximum size is rarely more than 4.5 feet in length, females are considerably smaller.
- 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.
- 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:

- Male monitors are very territorial, fighting any male they encounter. This often leaves severe bite wounds.
- ***Diurnal*** or day active.
- They intimidate their predators by lashing out with their long tails, inflating their throats and hissing loudly.
- Terrestrial, but climbs in trees to hunt for prey, reproduce, and avoid predators.

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Reproduction and Development:

- They are ***oviparous***, reproduction in which the eggs are released by the female and development of the offspring occurs outside the maternal body.
- The breeding season for savannah monitors is the rainy season, also called the feasting season due to the abundance of prey.
- When a male finds a female he will follow her relentlessly, occasionally biting her neck and scratching her neck and legs with his claws. Eventually the female will allow mating to occur.
- The female will dig a nest herself and lay 20 to 50 eggs. Some females will lay their eggs in termite mounds. The eggs have an unusually high hatch rate of nearly 100%

Additional Information:

- The species is hunted for its leather and meat and for the international pet trade. Over 30,000 live savannah monitors were imported into the US each year between 2000 and 2009, with total imports of live specimens into the US between 2000 and 2010 over 325,000 animals. During the same period over 1000 skins, shoes and products of the species were imported into the U.S.
- 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.

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. From 2000-2010 over 1000 skins, shoes and products made from savannah monitors were imported into the U.S.

Conservation Status: (IUCN Status): least concern

Conservation Efforts: N/A

Sources:

- Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Gardens
- http://www.backwaterreptiles.com/monitor-lizards/savannah-monitor-for-sale.html
- Halliday, T. Adler, K. 1986. The Encyclopedia of Reptiles and Amphibians.

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