Northern Exposure

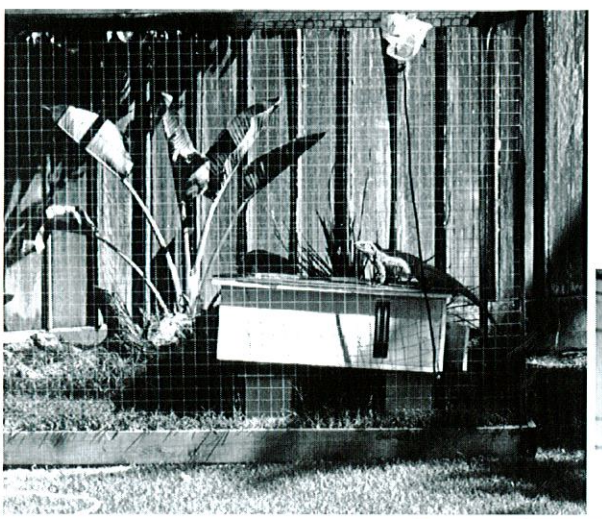
By Mark Malfatti

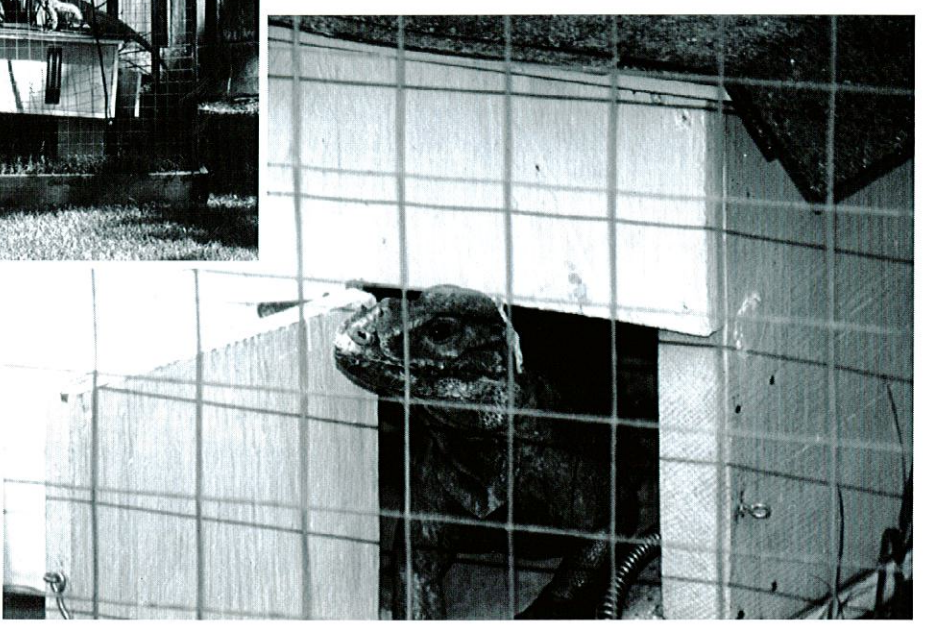
Most of the people I know who keep rock iguanas outdoors all year in the United States live between the 24th and the 33rd northern parallel. This year there's been an exception—the pair of *Cycluras* (*Cyclura c. cornuta*) that I keep are in Belmont, California. Belmont is 11 miles south of San Francisco and falls in between the 37th and the 38th northern parallel. The average summer high is about 86-90 degrees and the average summer low is about 60-70 degrees at night.

After three years and six months of being kept indoors, July, in the summer of '95 was the season the iguanas would see the outdoors for the first time. Their new enclosure was an 8' x 10' outdoor cage with 2" x 2" galvanized wire on all five sides. The hide box, a 2' x 3' x 1' box made of 2" x 12" redwood (sealed inside and out with a non-toxic sealer) with a hinged lid, was placed in the southwest corner of the cage. At this time, there was no additional heating.

The iguanas obviously enjoyed their new home. They ate like pigs and were putting on size. In mid-October we had a few nights that dropped down to 55 degrees. I decided to plug in the pig blanket. I monitored the outside temperature every day and had an indoor-outdoor thermometer on the hide box to closely monitor the temperature inside. In mid-November I noticed that the food wasn't being eaten. Since I was gone from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., 5 days a week, I hadn't noticed that the low swinging sun now left the hide box and its door in the shade most of the day. I moved the hide box to the northwest corner of the cage which was in an area that received the most sun. After this adjustment, the *Cycluras* were out again and feeding as normal.

In November I had set up their indoor winter cage. I was waiting for their feeding to slow or show some other sign of cold intolerance so I could bring them back indoors. I hesitated bringing them back in because they seemed content outside and the few hours of natural sunlight they





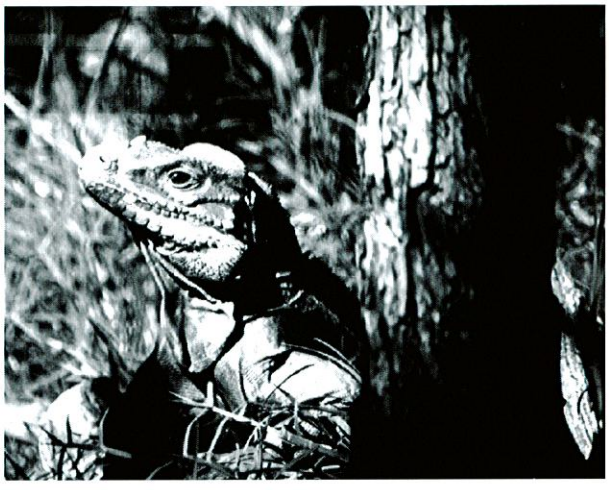
Cyclura cornuta in northern California. *Photographs: Mark Malfatti*

absorbed were better than eight to ten hours of artificial light. The days averaged about 60 to 70 degrees and the nights averaged 39 to 50 degrees. I would feed the *Cycluras* between 7 and 7:30 in the morning, and crack their door open slightly. When I returned home from work, the food was eaten. At night, I would go out with a flashlight and make sure both iguanas were in the hide box and then shut their door. Only on the weekends could I enjoy seeing them if the day was sunny, basking on top of their hide box that had black composite roofing on it. On rainy or cloudy days, I would only see them come outside to eat and then hustle back to the hide box.

I must note that this past winter was warmer than most in the Bay Area and I am unsure whether I will be able to keep the *Cycluras* outdoors next winter. I must also note that my *Cycluras* look larger and more robust now in March than they did in October.

As I am finishing this short report, it is the end of April and we are now experiencing some temperatures in the 90's. *Cycluras* might hold over a cold temperature adaptation from the Ice Age. I do not recommend northern keepers of *Cycluras* to adopt my practice unless they are willing to closely monitor their animals.

Editor's note: Mark's iguanas are probably near the limit of temperatures that they will endure and remain healthy longterm. Natural UV light, even in Northern California, is the critical factor responsible for his success. In a cooler year, these animals would have to spend the winter indoors. We also suggest keeping them indoors during the coolest part of the winter.



Cyclura cornuta in Northern California. *Photograph: Mark Malfatti*

Rhinoceros iguanas in a more benign climate in Florida at 24.6°N. *Photograph: R.W. Ehrig*

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Galapagos land iguana,
Conolophus subcristatus.
Photograph: William Hayes