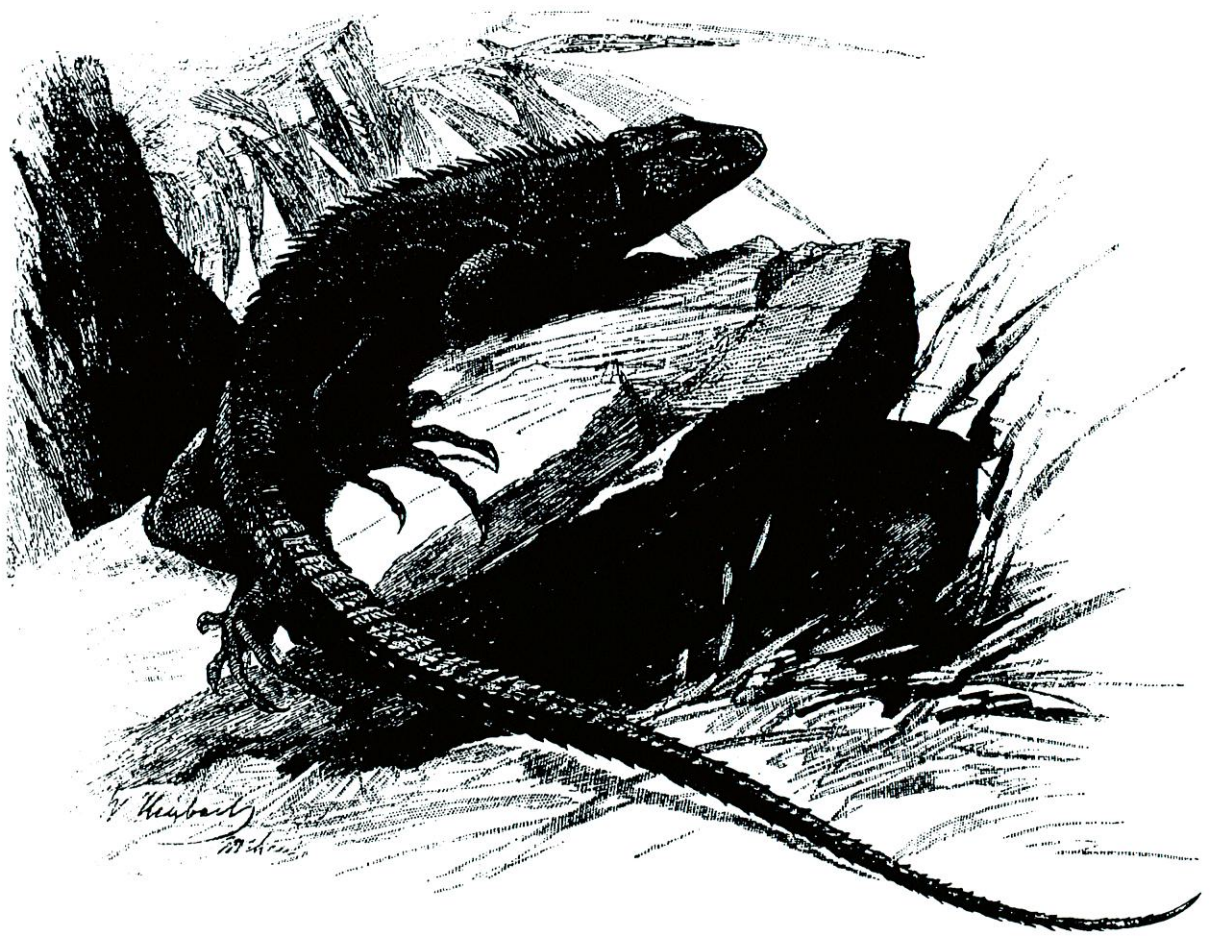
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The Black Iguana*

Franz Werner

The Spiny-tailed Iguanas (*Ctenosaura* Wgm. [translator's note: "Wgm." Refers to A.F.A. Wiegmann, a German zoologist who described many saurian genera in *Herpetologia Mexicana,* which was published in 1834]) are restricted to Middle America. They can be distinguished from *Cyclura* by the short rows of femoral pores. They are imposing animals that are primarily terrestrial or, at the most, seek shelter in the hollow trunks of trees. They have laterally compressed bodies, a relatively low middorsal crest, and tails equipped with whorls of spiny scales. The best known species is the Mexican Black Iguana, *Ctenosaura acanthura* Shaw [an English naturalist who applied proper Latin names to many "amphibians," which, around the turn of the 19th century, included reptiles]. This proud creature can reach a total length of over 1.20 m and is either uniformly graphite-black in color or bears black crossbands

* excerpted and translated from Franz Werner (1913. Die Lurche und Kriechtiere von Alfred Brehm. Zweiter Band: Kriechtiere (Schuppenkriechtiere). In: O. z. Strassen (ed.), *Brehms Tierleben. Allgemeine Kunde des Tierreichs.* 4th ed. Bibliographisches Institut, Leipzig and Wien). Translated by R. Powell.



Black Iguana, *Ctenosaura acanthura* Shaw 1/6 natural size.

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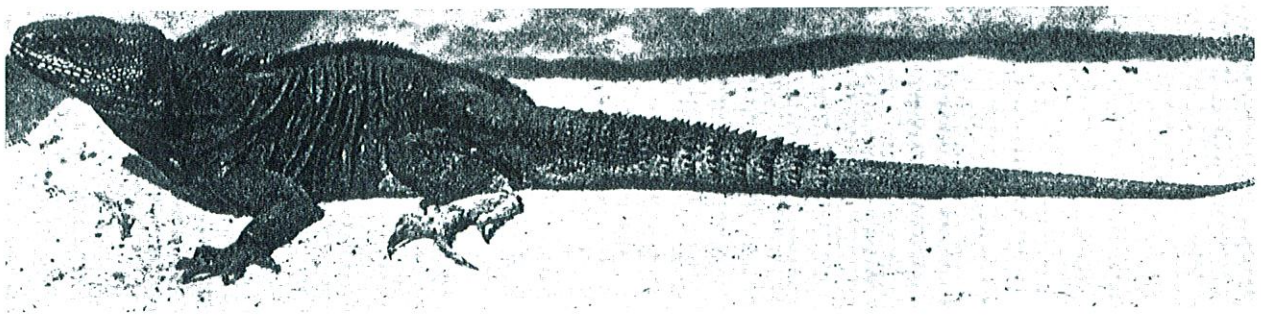
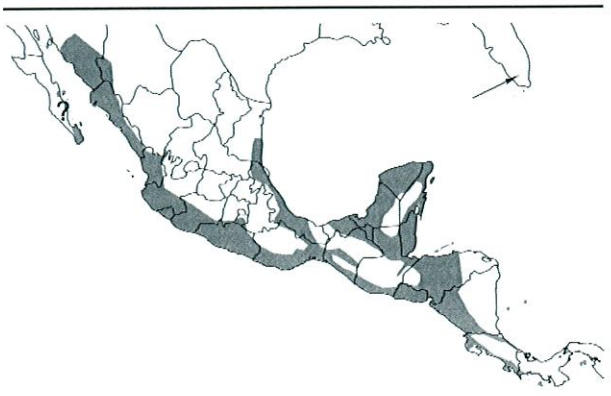


Black Iguana, *Ctenosaura acanthura* Shaw. 1/9 natural size. *Photograph by W.S. Berridge, F.Z.S. – London.*

on its rump and decorative black rings around its tail, both over a light ground color (light olive-brown, yellow-gray, or green). In captivity, these lizards readily consume both plant and animal matter. According to Sumichrast [François Sumichrast, a 19th century Swiss naturalist], several female Spiny-tailed Iguanas, like Common Iguanas, lay their eggs in a communal chamber; however, females do not appear as a rule to gather in large numbers during the nesting season, as one rarely finds more than 6–7 dozen eggs in a single nest. Ruthven [Alexander G. Ruthven, a famous American herpetologist] observed the subspecies *completa* Boc. [*completa* is now considered to be a synonym of *Ctenosaura similis;* "Boc." refers to M.-F. Bocourt, a French naturalist, who collected extensively in Middle America during the second half of the 19th century] primarily in the savannas of Mexico where trees form isolated clusters. In fact, each individual is true to the tree which it has staked out as its own, so that Ruthven almost always saw these animals on the trunks of their trees as he approached a given clump, often remaining in one place for hours at a time. Their diet consists largely of leaves.

The Black Iguana is considered especially tasty and, as a consequence, according to Sumichrast, is commonly hunted, particularly prior to festivals. Hunters seek these animals in burrows or split tree trunks, particularly those that are in the vicinity of temporary pools that hold water only during the rainy season. Should a lizard be caught, it is secured in the typical fashion. Even more favored than the meat, which is considered a delicacy, are the eggs. Quatrefages [an unknown source] tells a relevant tale of the traveler Sallé. As the latter entered a humble hut one evening in Middle America, he found only soup to quench his considerable appetite. To his surprise, however, his host, who had already apologized for the sparse meal, knew just how to spice it up in a most peculiar fashion. At the host's command, several small boys ran off to the woods and returned shortly thereafter with a large lizard that seemed destined for the traveler's plate. Instead of killing and broiling the animal, the host merely made a small incision in its side, reached in with his fingers, and carefully pulled out two strings of eggs. Subsequently, the host cleanly stitched the cut, rubbed a few hot ashes on the edges of the wound, and released the lizard. The eggs were placed in front of Sallé, who queried his host and was told that it was common practice to treat these animals in such a fashion, since one could therefore count on harvesting another batch of eggs in the following year.



Distribution of the genus *Ctenosaura*. The question mark indicates uncertainty regarding the presence of iguanas in southern Baja California and the arrow denotes the introduction of Spiny-tailed Iguanas into southern Florida. Modified from Gunther Köhler (2002. *Schwarzleguane.* Herpeton Verlag Elke Köhler, Offenbach, Germany).

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A male *Ctenosaura bakeri* (Swamper or Utila Iguana) on Utila Island, Honduras, March 2003. *Photograph by John Binns.*