



Grand Cayman Blue Iguana "Godzilla" (~1934–2004).

# Requiem for Godzilla

Colette Adams

Curator of Herpetology  
Gladys Porter Zoo  
Brownsville, Texas

Photographs by John Binns.

If you have ever had a family member that, against all odds, lived past their life expectancy, you may identify with the relationship the herpetological crew at the Gladys Porter Zoo had with Godzilla — the oldest living lizard on record. A giant of a Grand Cayman Blue Iguana (*Cyclura lewisi*), he measured over 50 cm from snout to vent. When he came to the Gladys Porter Zoo in 1997, he was estimated to be 62 years of age. He had a giant head, an enormous, yet gaunt body, and a senile cataract in one of his eyes. Despite his incredible appetite and his ability to consume large volumes of food, he never seemed to be able to gain or carry much weight — just like grandpa.

In March 2004, John Binns asked me to write an article on Godzilla, and I agreed. Although we have known for years that Godzilla's days were numbered, I had no clue this article would be written in eulogy (see also the inside back cover of *IGUANA* 11(2)). At approximately 69 years of age, Godzilla died in late May of this year from age-related liver failure. Based on the appearance of his internal organs, he looked and acted amazingly well until a week or so before his death. Blind in one eye and partially blind in the other, Godzilla had gotten a bit wobbly, and would sometimes tumble, rather than climb off his favorite basking spots. As he grew more and more senile, we watched with great compassion and respect. Godzilla had led a colorful and amazing life. His history tells volumes about the tenacity and resilience of both this individual animal and the world's most critically endangered iguana species.

West Indian Rock Iguanas of the genus *Cyclura* are, as a group, under severe threat throughout their range. As large island endemics with no adaptations to protect against mammalian predators and competitors, they are suffering catastrophic declines from dog, cat, and rat predation, hunting, habitat degradation by goats and cattle, and large scale habitat loss to human uses. The Grand Cayman Blue Iguana is the most endangered in the group, with an estimated 10–25 individuals surviving from the original wild population (see *Iguana Times* 9(3):51–58; 10(1):15–20; *IGUANA* 11(1):30–31).

The Gladys Porter Zoo is one of a handful of US facilities that have breeding programs for Grand Cayman Blue Iguanas. Most of the captive Blue Iguanas in North America are related to one another, making it very important to preserve the genetic material of those individuals, like Godzilla, that have not bred in captivity. US facilities work closely with officials on Grand Cayman to preserve what little habitat remains and support their efforts to build and maintain breeding facilities. Without the

dynamic efforts of the Grand Cayman National Trust (see the profile of Fred Burton, *IGUANA* 10(2):53–55), The International Iguana Foundation, many supporting members of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, and dedicated iguana conservationists outside the zoo community, this species would already be past the point of no return. Hopefully, the combination of habitat protection, habitat restoration, and the release of captive-hatched iguanas in protected areas on Grand Cayman will ensure their existence for many years to come.

Godzilla was captured as a full-grown adult on Grand Cayman in 1950 by naturalist Ira Thompson. Godzilla weighed over 15 pounds and was estimated to be at least 15 years of age at that time. I was told that he was captured on Grand Cayman with a guava on a treble hook, and the hook split his upper lip. Although the lip healed, Godzilla was left with two fleshy protrusions on either side of his snout (these moustache-like protrusions, although surgically removable, were left alone, serving as permanent identifying marks). He was imported to the US in 1985 by Ramon Noegel of Life Fellowship in Florida. Although offered multiple opportunities to breed, according to Greg Moss, Godzilla was already showing signs of aging and never sired a fertile clutch of eggs. Ownership was transferred to Tom Crutchfield in the early 1990s.

Godzilla came to the Gladys Porter Zoo during late winter in 1997, along with three other Blue Iguanas, two males and one female. When the group arrived, many of the adults needed medical treatment to help them recover from the trip. Our first introduction to Godzilla's health problems came the day after his arrival. He was initially treated for a fungal infection in his gastrointestinal tract. Surprisingly, he responded rapidly to antibiotics and a giant dose of South Texas sunshine. Despite the presence of another large adult male that was much more athletic, Godzilla established the outside yard and night house facility as his territory, and never relinquished his dominant status.

Godzilla was one of only a few founding Grand Cayman Blue Iguanas in the US, and, having made no contribution to the captive gene pool, getting him to reproduce became a priority — well, right after keeping him alive. Just like any geriatric creature, something always seemed to be going on with his health. He would tear off a toenail, revealing clotting factor problems that required vitamin supplementation and bandaging. He had an intermittent sinus problem that occasionally required antibiotic administration. For some strange reason, he had periodic bouts of tail problems that would require the surgical removal of sev-

eral inches of his tail. We would beef him up with vitamins and medication for weeks prior to such a surgical procedure.

We have a saying at our reptile department: with herps, real medical emergencies are rare. However, this saying never applied to Godzilla and his injured toenails that refused to stop bleeding. Indeed, Godzilla routinely brought out the “hero” in our veterinary staff. He usually gratified us by bouncing back after his emergency treatments.

Unfortunately, the adult female that arrived with Godzilla in 1997 died of coelomitis secondary to chronic egg retention just four months after her receipt. In June 2000, a suitable potential mate for Godzilla was sent to us from the National Zoo in Washington. I knew our work was already cut out for us. She had been kept indoors and was cued to lay eggs in February. In February, the weather is still cold in Brownsville, and most of our *Cyclura* have historically laid eggs in June or July. I wondered how long Godzilla and the new female would take to get their reproductive cycles in-sync.

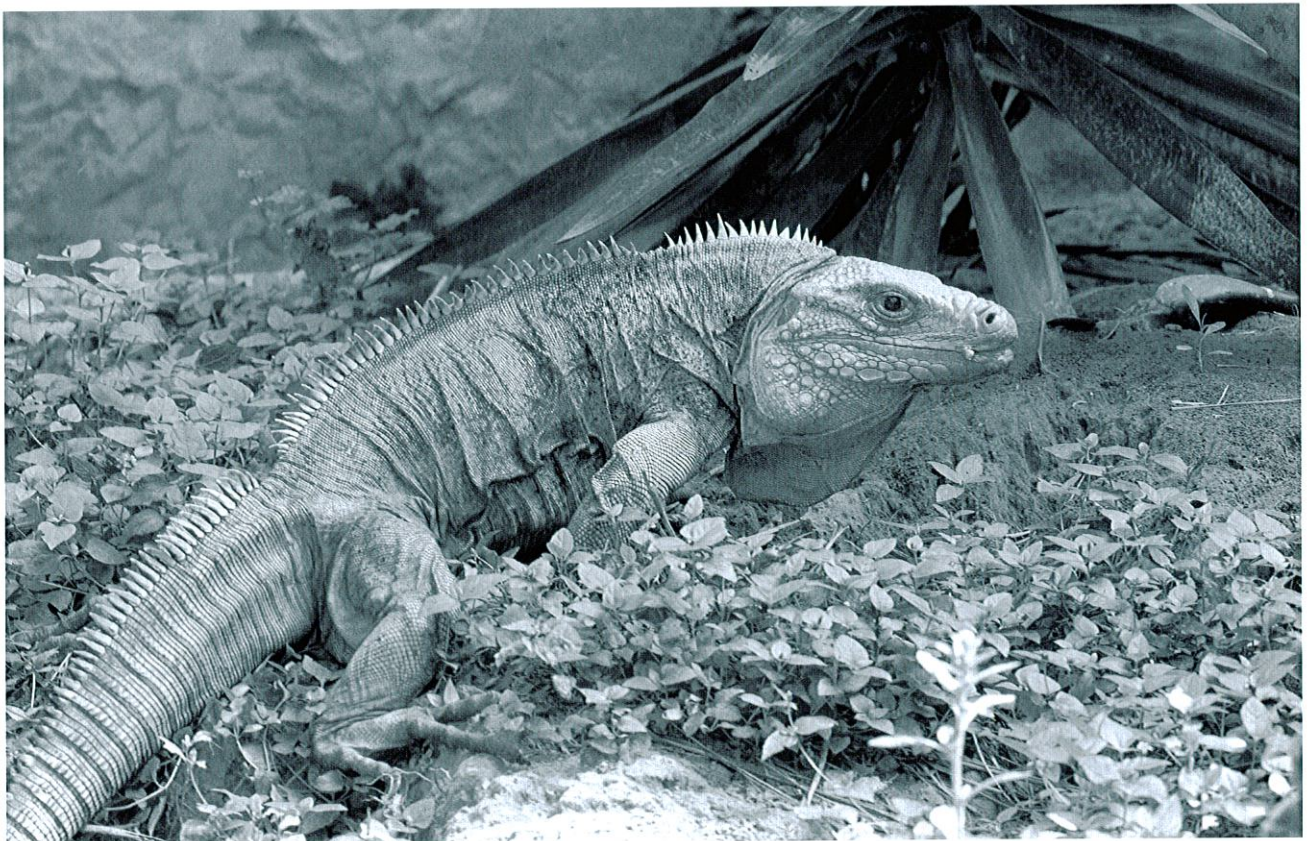
On a very warm day in April 2001, Dave Martin, Head Keeper of Reptiles, decided that the time had come to give the pair a try at breeding. Godzilla looked interested in the female, but she was much more nimble than he was, and always managed to scamper away from his advances. Neither Godzilla nor Dave was willing to give up easily, and Dave contrived an ingenious plan. He brought both of the animals into the confines of their barn and nighthouse in hopes that the female would not succeed in getting away. She didn't get away, but Dave said Godzilla seemed unwilling to breed indoors. So, the three of

them went outdoors. This time, Dave held the female's tail to keep her from running away. Again, Godzilla seemed interested, but possibly concerned about Dave's presence in his territory. Finally, Dave carried the female into the barn and crouched at the undersized door, constructed to allow the passage of iguanas — not humans. Holding the female's tail securely, he extended his arm and the female into the outdoor enclosure.

Success! Dave had made himself “invisible” enough to keep Godzilla from being intimidated. Godzilla approached the female and grabbed the skin of her nape. Figuring Godzilla had it handled, Dave let go of the female. However, when Godzilla would



Godzilla's species name changed three times during his estimated 69 years of life. He was captured as *Cyclura macleayi lewisi*, later became *Cyclura nubila lewisi*, and passed away as *Cyclura lewisi*. This photograph shows his distinct telltale “moustache.”



Although handicapped by the ravages of age, Godzilla remained as proud as any Blue Iguana many decades his junior. Shown here in his display area, Godzilla would pause frequently to rest while enjoying the warm Texas sun.



As Godzilla aged, he became increasingly unstable, often had difficulty reaching his favorite basking spot, and sometimes tumbled rather than climbed down. However, atop his basking spot, his proud stance seemed to say that age was irrelevant, and he remained a grand Grand Cayman Blue until the end.

try to readjust his grip, the female would scamper off. After several similar attempts, Dave figured he had nothing to lose and he did not let go of the female. Finally, with Dave's assistance, Godzilla copulated with the female. This was repeated a week later, with the same results.

No eggs were produced as the result of that breeding, and Dave got creative once again in 2002. On 6 May, Dave played matchmaker. This time, he learned that, if he maintained a low profile or remained partially hidden in the outdoor enclosure, Godzilla would tolerate his presence. Copulation this time was of much shorter duration.

When the female laid infertile eggs in July 2002, we suspected that mating had taken place too early in the reproductive cycle of the female — or Godzilla was infertile.

In the two years that followed, the matchmaking scheme was repeated, but Godzilla no longer showed any interest in breeding. The female continued to lay eggs each year in mid-July, but her eggs in 2003 and 2004 were infertile.

As each breeding season passed for Godzilla, we knew that he might not be around for the next. This was certainly so for the breeding season in 2004. Increasingly wobbly and uncoordinated, we watched him closely, although he continued to feed well when he could figure out where the food was. I discovered that I could place his food in the bottom of a five-gallon bucket, lay the bucket on its side and let him walk headfirst into the bucket. This became the most energy efficient way to feed an old lizard that could not see very well and tired easily when fed by hand.

In mid-May, we were treating Godzilla for an eye injury he had sustained after running into a gunnite wall, when we noticed how jaundiced the inside of his mouth looked. Blood work revealed an extremely low red blood cell count and our veterinarians suspected a failing liver. Almost as though he knew that his secret was out, Godzilla refused to eat from that day on. By the following day, he would not move in and out of the sun to thermoregulate and I brought him up to the reptile house. Two days later, wrapped in my favorite flannel snake bag, Godzilla died peacefully in his sleep. A quiet sadness fell over the Herpetarium that day.

Still, we had to move quickly to ship his gonads and tissue samples to the San Diego Zoo's Center for Reproduction of Endangered Species (CRES). Tandora Grant helped make the arrangements for the priority shipment that would result in the preservation of his precious genetic material. Two days after his passing, she informed us that he still had live sperm in his testes at the time of his death.

Histopathology reports confirmed severe age-related cirrhosis of the liver as the cause of death. The pathologist commented he had never been presented with such an old lizard. We were certain that was true.

Like the few remaining wild Grand Cayman Blue Iguanas, Godzilla was a trooper that fought the odds every day. All iguanas are unique and spectacular in their own right, but Godzilla was "perfect" — a favorite of zoo keepers and volunteers alike. He will truly be missed.

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Grand Cayman Blue Iguana, *Cyclura lewisi*, Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands (see story p. 148). Photograph by Fred Burton.