HUSBANDRY

Iguana Restraint and Handling

Jeff Lemm

Center for Reproduction of Endangered Species (CRES), Zoological Society of San Diego

Photographs by the author unless otherwise indicated.

In order to reduce the risk of injury to both animal and keeper, proper restraint techniques are necessary whenever iguanas are handled. Handling and restraint impose a tremendous amount of stress on an animal, and iguanas should be handled only when necessary (vet checks, weighing and measuring, etc.). In addition, keepers should do everything possible to reduce stress on cagemates that are not being captured. For instance, iguanas hiding in tubes or other hide areas should not be disturbed. Instead, the whole hide area should be moved when in pursuit of the desired animal. These same methods should be used with everyday cage maintenance. Captive animals may show signs of stress immediately following capture and these signs, which may last a few days, generally include appetite loss, constant hiding, and flight behavior.

Hatchling animals such as this Rhinoceros Iguana (*Cyclura cornuta*) can be handled by gently grasping the entire body. In some cases, the head can be held with two fingers to avoid potential bites.

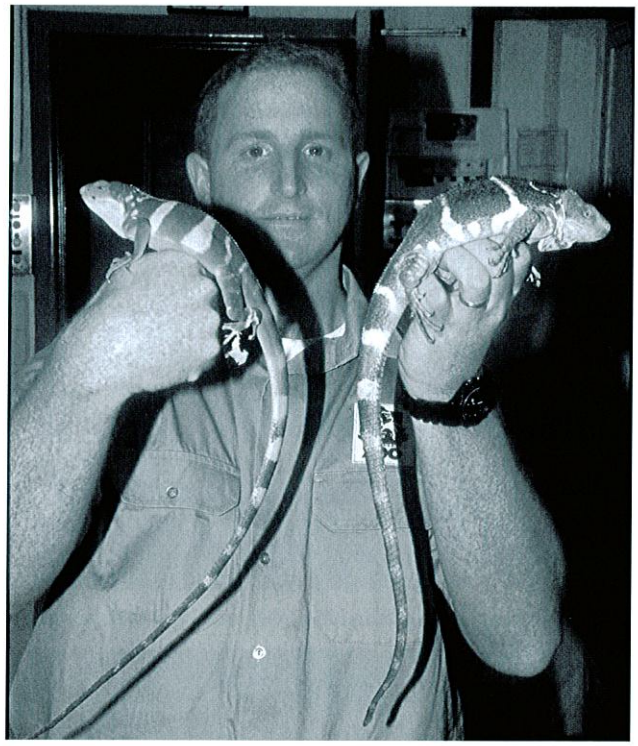
Juvenile iguanas, such as this Anegada Iguana (*Cylcura pinguis*), can be held in similar fashion to hatchlings. Older juveniles may need to be held with two hands.

Because iguanas have both strong jaws and large, powerful claws, minor injuries to keepers are common. Even juvenile iguanas can inflict nasty bite wounds that often require stitches, and a bite from an adult iguana can be serious. Iguana scratches are common, especially from the long rear toes of an iguana's back legs. In addition, hatchling and juvenile iguanas may have their tails broken due to improper handling techniques.

Perhaps the easiest, least-stressful way to capture an animal from an enclosure is with a net. Large fishing nets, with the net replaced by a cloth bag, work well for this purpose. Netting rips easily and iguanas have the ability to break through the net and escape or they may become wrapped in the netting itself. Hand-grabbing or manually capturing iguanas works well with younger animals or larger, non-aggressive adults. Keep in mind that when cornered, some iguanas may become very agitated and some species may rush or jump toward the keeper with mouth agape.

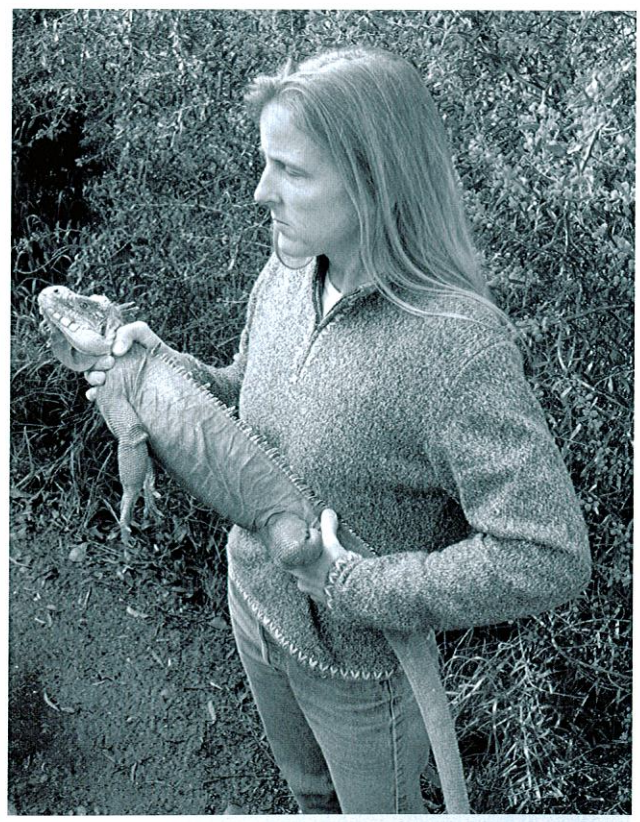
Hatchling iguanas and smaller species (*Brachylophus*, *Dipsosaurus*, *Oplurus*, and *Sauromalus*) should be restrained in the middle of the body with the head secure between the thumb and forefinger. Often, some species (*Brachylophus* and sometimes *Dipsosaurus*) can be held on the palm of the hand, eliminating body or head restraint altogether. Larger juvenile, subadult, and adult iguanas should be restrained with two hands. One hand should lightly, yet firmly grasp the animal behind the head, either in the neck or shoulder region to prevent the animal from turning and biting. The second hand should be placed over the pelvic region, keeping a firm grasp on the rear legs that are often brought forward to scratch the hand or arm that is restraining the head. The tail of the iguana is also a powerful weapon and can be restrained under the arm of the rear hand. In many cases, restraining the tail and one of the rear legs in a single grip is easier and more efficient.

When possible, large iguanas should be restrained by two people with one person holding the head and a second indi-



Smaller iguanas, especially individuals that are accustomed to handling, such as Fiji Iguanas (*Brachylophus* spp.) and Desert Iguanas (*Dipsosaurus* spp.) often sit in the hands of keepers. Animals that are more flighty can be grasped like juvenile *Cyclura*. In this photograph, the author is holding a Fijian Banded Iguana (*Brachylophus fasciatus*) and a Fijian Crested Iguana (*B. vitiensis*). *Photographs by Mike Swan.*

Chuckwallas (*Sauromalus* spp.) are best held with a firm grip around the body and may need to have the head restrained. Pictured here is a San Esteban Island Chuckwalla (*Sauromalus varius*).



Tandora Grant illustrates that large iguanas (in this case a Lesser Antillean Iguana, *Iguana delicatissima*) are best handled by grasping the head or neck with one hand and the tail and one rear leg with the other hand.

"Tame" iguanas can be supported on one arm, while the tail and rear end of the animal are gently grasped or supported with the other hand. If the animal becomes agitated or tries to flee, the supporting front hand can easily restrain the head or the animal can be set down. Here Allison Alberts handles "Gitmo," a large Cuban Iguana (*Cyclura nubila nubila*).

Large iguanas are best restrained by two people, with one person holding the head and a second person holding the tail and rear legs. This is an adult Anegada Iguana (*Cyclura pinguis*).

Iguanas such as this Lesser Antillean Iguana (*Iguana delicatissima*) are easily captured without harm by using large, cloth nets.

Tandora Grant is holding "Gitmo," a large Cuban Iguana (*Cyclura nubila nubila*) that resides at the San Diego Zoo.

vidual holding the hindquarters of the animal. During measurements of larger iguanas, some keepers and field researchers have found that blindfolds such as elastic knee bands placed over the entire head of the animal work well to calm the animal and keep it from attempting to bite. This technique also will help protect the person taking measurements, as many species of iguana will keep the mouth agape during restraint, and any hand movement near the mouth may result in a bite.

In some cases, large, tame iguanas can be handled without restraint for purposes of education. The easiest way to handle these individuals is by resting them on the forearm with the hand gently supporting the chest of the animal. The handler's second hand is used to support the rear of the body. If the animal should become agitated, the forward hand can easily be shifted to restrain the head of the animal while the handler's other hand can restrain the tail and/or rear legs. So-called "tame" animals can quickly become nervous or irritated outside of their normal quarters, and handlers should always be aware of their surroundings, in case an animal needs to be restrained.

Reference

Lemm, J. In Prep. *Husbandry Manual for West Indian Iguanas.* American Zoo and Aquarium Association.

VOLUME 11, NUMBER 3 SEPTEMBER 2004 US$6.00

IGUANA

JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL IGUANA SOCIETY WWW.IGUANASOCIETY.ORG

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