



# Head Start for Iguanas



Photos provided by Dawn Fleuchaus

The Jamaican iguana is a greenish gray with blue tints, but it looks red after burying eggs in the red earth. Above: Dawn Fleuchaus peers from a blind.

Dawn Fleuchaus peeks out from the gray mesh of a researchers' blind. She's hiding from iguanas. "The female iguanas are very cautious," she says. "If they see or hear people, they usually will run off. So we sit quietly." It's 91 degrees, maybe hotter. She's on the Caribbean island of Jamaica, in a remote, protected area called Hellshire Hills. She'll be inside this hot, humid hiding area for at least six hours. She keeps track of all the Jamaican iguanas that come and go, burrowing, laying eggs, fighting. She's volunteering as a researcher for the Jamaican Iguana Recovery Project, and she has been doing it annually since 2002.

This, apparently, is a zookeeper's idea of a vacation. Fleuchaus, who is area supervisor of the Australia and North America areas at the Milwaukee County Zoo, goes to Jamaica twice a year. She's there when iguanas lay their eggs in May-June, and she's back when the eggs hatch in August-September. She and other researchers collect the newly hatched iguanas. They're all examined, some are released, and about 40 of them go to Jamaica's Hope Zoo in Kingston for three to five years. This gives them a head start. They live in safety till they grow big enough to defend themselves from a feral cat or a mongoose. Then they're released back into the wild.

"The Jamaican iguana is believed to be one of the most endangered reptiles in the world," she says, because it's found only in one small area of Jamaica. "This project has been very successful in increasing the number of wild iguanas." In its 25 years, the Jamaican Iguana Recovery Project has collected and processed more than 1,000 iguanas (over 300 in 2013 alone). The wild population has risen from an estimated 12 iguanas in 2003 to a few hundred. Fleuchaus notes that her conservation work

has been supported by the Zoological Society of Milwaukee and the Milwaukee County Zoo.

A fight starts at the nesting area between two females. There are always two groups, says Fleuchaus. Some iguanas are just arriving at the site to dig a 9- or 10-foot burrow to lay their eggs. Others have just buried their eggs and now, instinctually, are filling in the hole. Sometimes they also fill in other holes with dirt, burying a mom who's still in the burrow laying her eggs. So there's a fight. Then there's the old female Fleuchaus saw last year who has been coming to this same site for years. From the iguana's markings, it's clear she was one of the recovery project's early hatchlings who was "headstarted" and then released in the mid-to late 1990s. This wise elder stays out of the fights. "She sits on a rock basking behind the blind, not in the nesting area. She'll sit there for a number of days until she decides to come in to dig her nest." Iguanas are fascinating, she adds. They come to lay eggs right after the rainy season, when the ground gets very hot. "It's really funny to watch them walking on tiptoes because their feet are hot. They'll dig a little and then tiptoe over to the shade. But they have such a strong urge to nest that they keep coming into the sun to dig their burrow."

There's a new worry for researchers. A Chinese development company wants to build a shipping port on the Goat Islands, which are about 2 miles from the iguanas' only remaining habitat. Even though the nearby refuge is protected, conservationists fear the project will bring hikers and hunters into the area. "Iguanas don't do well with human disturbance," says Fleuchaus. Meanwhile, she's heading back to Jamaica in May to watch the start of a new generation.

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