

Can a Spiny-tailed Iguana Survive in L.A.?

John Aristei

In September of 1995, a 14" spiny-tailed iguana, *Ctenosaura similis*, named Tom escaped from my house. I saw him a few times in the yard but was never able to get close enough to capture him. When winter came, he disappeared.

I live in a coastal suburb of Los Angeles, California. Winters are typically rainy and damp with temperatures sometimes dropping into the low 40's. There are weeks when the temperature does not get above 65°F. For a lizard that is indigenous to the tropical and semi-tropical climates of Central America, this seems like a sure death sentence. Can a spiny-tailed iguana survive in L.A.?

The first year I was not too surprised as we had a relatively mild winter. Summer 1996, I often saw Tom feeding on wild dandelion flowers and leaves from an ice plant ground cover that grows on an embankment in the back yard. I would sometimes throw him mealworms from a deck, which he cautiously accepted, never getting close enough to capture.

One time I chased him into a storm drain that exited 15' down the hill to an asphalt run-off. I tried to flush him out by running a garden hose down the pipe with no success. Finally, I filled a trashcan half-full of water and created my own mini-flash flood. Out popped Tom, but even after being cooled and swamped by water, he was too quick to catch. Attempts at noosing and luring him under a trap door box with mealworms failed. After a while, my wife began to joke that I was like the Coyote trying to catch Road Runner.

In the summer of 1997, I did not see Tom at all and figured that the long cold wet El Niño winter of 96-97 had done him in. During a cold rainy week in February of 1998, a neighbor from six houses up the street came by claiming to have found an unusual lizard in his storm drain. It was Tom! He was in terrible shape—skin and bones. I nursed him back to health and by springtime he was hearty enough to share an 8' by 12' outdoor enclosure with a rhinoceros iguana, *Cyclura cornuta*. This lasted

about a week until he escaped by squeezing through a large electrical duct.

I was not too upset because he has been a survivor. His survival techniques include absorbing heat from the asphalt storm run-offs and black PVC storm drainpipes that run throughout the neighborhood. The PVC pipes in my yard have a 5' section, which is exposed to the sun that can get very hot to touch on even a mildly sunny day.

The winter of 98-99 had freezing temperatures that destroyed much of California's orange crops. Guess who I found back in the cage he had escaped from a year before? The cage has just been modified with a large gauge screen that Tom can easily squeeze in and out of. I sometimes see him eating off the rhino iguanas' food plate, or sunning on the shelves below the UVT plexiglass roof. The shelves are about 12" below the glass and it gets hot like the dashboard of a car. My rhino iguanas don't seem to mind him and he darts back out in the yard whenever I get near the cage.

Tom is a wary spiny-tailed iguana—I guess he has to be to avoid the neighborhood cats, dogs, and occasional hawks, snakes and raccoons as well as me. During the last five years Tom has spent about six months in captivity. He has otherwise been surviving on his own in the relatively harsh climate of Los Angeles, California.



Tom, an adult *Ctenosaura similis*, spends most of his time exploring the suburbs of Los Angeles, CA. Photograph: John Aristei

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Adult male marine iguana, *Amblyrhynchus cristatus*, from Academy Bay, Santa Cruz (Indefatigable) Island. Note the powerful front legs and extremely long claws.
Photograph: Karl Switak