

# Iguanas spread in Florida as climate warms: 'They're a menace'

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An iguana trapped last month at a South Florida home. (Lori Rozsa)

By Lori Rozsa

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FORT LAUDERDALE — The first time he saw iguanas on his roof last winter, Bob Lugari was enchanted. He had recently moved from California to South Florida, and the bright green lizards seemed to fit right into the subtropical vibe of his new home.

"I thought, how adorable, how cute, how Floridian," Lugari said. "They looked so tropical. I never had iguanas in California, and I thought, this is part of the Florida experience. I should embrace this."

But soon Lugari found his carefully cultivated ornamental plants defoliated. He started finding messy brown piles of iguana droppings on his pool deck. He saw several lizards, fattened from months of feasting on his flowers, hanging out around his house and yard.

“They aren’t cute anymore,” Lugari said this month of the animals, which are not native to Florida. “They’re a menace.”

The state of Florida agrees. After a warm winter and now with record-breaking summer heat — the kind of weather iguanas thrive in — the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has declared open season on the exotic reptile.

“The FWC encourages homeowners to kill green iguanas on their own property whenever possible,” the commission recently wrote on its website. “Iguanas can also be killed year-round and without a permit on 22 public lands in south Florida.”

Agency biologists say they don’t know how many iguanas are in Florida, but they know the kinds of problems they’re causing. These include “erosion, degradation of infrastructure such as water control structures, canal banks, sea walls and building foundations,” state biologist Dan Quinn said in an email.

Along with doing damage by digging, iguanas destroy landscaping and ornamental plants, including some that are endangered. They can also carry salmonella.

Green iguanas have been spotted in Florida since the 1960s, but their numbers have soared in recent years. They’re native to Central America, parts of South America and some islands in the eastern Caribbean.

Climate change is helping them spread quickly in South Florida, said Joseph Wasilewski, who has studied green iguanas for 40 years. He’s part of the University of Florida’s “Croc Docs” team of scientists who study wildlife in Florida and the Caribbean.

“Climate change certainly has something to do with it,” Wasilewski said. “It’s warming things up and allowing them to go further north.”



University of Florida biologist Joseph Wasilewski with a green iguana. "If we don't do something soon, they could literally take over," he said. (Joseph Wasilewski)

Florida needs to get a handle on the green iguana invasion before it gets worse, Wasilewski said. He said he saw Grand Cayman island go from having no green iguanas in 2000 to having an estimated 1.6 million in 2018. The island launched a large-scale cull last fall, and nearly 800,000 iguanas have been killed so far.

In Florida, "in the last five or 10 years, I've seen the population literally explode," Wasilewski said.

Green iguanas can grow up to five feet long and weigh around 17 pounds, although local trappers say they've seen bigger lizards than that. They live for 10 years or more, and the females can lay six dozen eggs at a time. They dig long tunnels, up to 80 feet — sometimes under sea walls, sometimes under houses and occasionally under highway overpasses.

The state's call to action has resulted in business opportunities. Blake Wilkins and Perry Colato are co-founders of Redline Iguana Removal. Wilkins, a biologist for Broward County, and Colato, a county firefighter, are childhood buddies who grew up catching the iguanas and turning them into pets.

“They were all named Iggy,” Colato recalled. “We’d catch them by hand. There weren’t that many back then. But they have no natural predators here, and there’s nothing to limit their population.”

Colato and Wilkins started their business in the fall of 2018. They charge \$50 to trap one iguana or a flat rate if a homeowner has a multi-iguana problem, which is usually the case. They trapped and removed the iguanas on Lugari’s property in May.

“They’re great swimmers, they’re great climbers, they’re great diggers,” Wilkins said. “They can get on your roof, and they can dig under your house.”



Blake Wilkins and Perry Colato, the co-founders of Redline Iguana Removal, with a green

iguana they trapped at a South Florida home last month. (Lori Rozsa) (For The Washington Post)

The pair sets traps baited with favorite iguana foods, such as pieces of mango and melon. They said they check the traps frequently and almost always find an iguana. They kill the lizards with a rifle shot and then have them cremated.

Both admit to having mixed feelings about that, but they said they've seen firsthand the damage iguanas can do. So has Lugari, who found the animals' toileting habits to be particularly unpleasant.

"At first, I thought it was mud. I scrubbed the entire area and got it perfectly clean," Lugari said. "The next morning, the splash marks were back. Then I noticed that they were parallel to the roof line. I looked up, and I saw what they were doing. They were backing themselves up to the edge of the roof, doing their business, splashing it on the tile below and then going back to sunning themselves on my roof."

A green iguana makes itself at home on the roof of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., resident Bob Lugari. (Bob Lugari) The only natural population control that works with green iguanas is temperature: They don't like the cold.

"It's got to be below 40 degrees for four consecutive days, and that's very rare in South Florida," Colato said. "So it's only gotten worse and worse."

A cold snap two years ago in the state put iguanas into a dormant state, causing frozen iguanas to fall out of trees. They weren't dead, just deeply chilled.

"I had a buddy pick one up and put it in the back of his car," Colato recalled. "He was going to take it home and eat it, but it thawed out while he was driving and basically came alive. He freaked out and pulled over and opened the door, and it ran away."

Iguanas are a food source in some Caribbean countries, where they're called "chicken of the trees." Colato said a friend from Trinidad and Tobago cooked one in a curry. ("It was very good, actually," he said.) But most Floridians don't view them as entrees.

Trapper Jose Gonzalez started his Palm Beach County-based company, Iguana Police, last year. Business has been brisk, he said.



“The numbers are getting higher, and the iguanas are getting bigger,” Gonzalez said. “I think they’re running out of space south of here, and these waterways in South Florida are the perfect vehicles for them to move up and down the coast.”

Like Colato and Wilkins, Gonzalez said he feels a twinge of guilt about shooting the animals.

“But they’re a nuisance. They’re really no different than a rat in that sense,” Gonzalez said. “They create damage, they spread disease, and they’re invasive.”

With so many iguanas in the firing line, captures occasionally go wrong. Removal services sometimes use air rifles in wide-open areas, such as golf courses and farms, and one trapper’s shot recently went astray in Boca Raton.

Homeowner E’Lyn Bryan said she was inside her home when she heard a pool maintenance worker screaming on her patio.

“I ran out, and his leg was bleeding,” Bryan said.

The worker told authorities that he was doing pool work when he felt his leg burning, the Boca Raton Police Department wrote in an incident report. He said he heard “a lot of popping noises before he got hurt” and “determined it was caused by a BB pellet that was being shot from an iguana hunter a couple of houses down.”

The iguana hunter apologized, and paramedics said the pool man’s injury was superficial, according to the police. The victim did not press charges.

The trapper had been hired by the homeowners association, something that infuriated Bryan.

“I want the iguana killing stopped,” Bryan said. “These creatures deserve to live. They shot one in the leg, and now it has to get around on three legs. If humans can’t cohabitate with them, there has to be a more humane way to deal with it.”

Wasilewski agrees, to a point.

“The state has to address the problem,” he said. “I’d suggest homeowners use professional removal services rather than having people go out and start shooting like it’s the wild, wild West. But if we don’t do something soon, they could literally take over.”

*Lori Rozsa is a freelance reporter and frequent contributor to The Washington Post. She is a former correspondent for People magazine and a former reporter and bureau chief for the Miami Herald.*