

Iguanas, Each One Is a Character



By Greg Mertz, DVM

Iguanas are crazy. Then you get them indoors as pets and then who's crazy? Must be the people who own them. Are they domestic or are they wild?

I owned one iguana in my home. She was an older iguana when she came to us. She was probably 13 years, and of moderate size, maybe 3 1/2 feet long from snoot to tail-tip. She had the scars of an older iguana: missing toes, irregular lip line, and re-grown tail.

She lasted about three weeks roaming around the house. We set up a warm hide area with UVB spot lights, tree branch perches, and a ready supply of collard greens and other veggie items. She never perched on the stand made for her but instead sat on the head of the sofa draped across the headrest where she threatened anyone who sat there with head bobbing and tail flicking.

Then one of the kids, or maybe me, let the door open and out she went to the backyard. It was May and pretty nice out, luckily for, you guessed it, Iggy. There was hell to pay until we found her. There she was sitting in the wild rose bush laced with European bittersweet just outside the back door.

She resisted arrest on several tries and that is where we left her. She was happier than all-get-out. Sun streamed on this bush most of the day. The shade of the branches gave her good cover when she wanted it and that is where she lived the rest of the summer.

She came in at summer's end about a pound and a half heavier and with a serene attitude towards us all. Outdoors had done her good.

Iguanas are caught in a never-never land of being half domesticated and half wild. Because of their size and because of their temperature, perching, and bowel requirements iguanas are difficult pets to own in this part of the world. Way down South



where they would do well out-of-doors all year round few people choose to have them as pets, because there are already three in the back yard.

I have treated over a thousand iguanas in my veterinary career and have acted as principal caretaker for a variety of museum, nature center and zoo personalities. And, that is an important point. Each one of these iguanas come with their own personality. Each one is a character in their own right. Client after client tell me so.

One lady slept in bed with her iguana every night. It takes a crazy iguana to do that. One other iguana owner used to take her iguana for walks in the warm weather to a local pond where he would get in the water and swim a lap, come back to his caretaker and walk home with her again. No leash.

I had a client come into my office with a big cardboard box all taped up. He said, "He's a little agitated."

"What is?" I asked as I unwrapped the tape. A four-foot long iguana shot out of the box, hit the ceiling, ricocheted off the tiles, and landed on the exam table. "Yes, he is," I said.

Iguanas are curious fellows. They show it by wandering around looking at this and that, and by tasting everything they encounter with their tongues. What a way to be curious! That would be like me sticking my tongue on the

computer keys to make sure I spelled iguana right.

When an animal becomes domesticated there are repeated interactions between animal and human. This takes place over many generations of animals and many generations of people. I believe we are in full throttle with the developing domestication of the green iguana.

It is rare for humans to start this process. It is usually the animal. I see this in iguanas. They are on their way to domestication but they are not there yet. It is interesting to watch them in both the domesticated setting of pet care and to see them in the wild.

In the wild they they go about their business, climbing shrubbery, and small trees, eating leaves, interacting with one another, getting into brawls about whose branch is whose. As they head for domesticity they get into our business, and that is where there is hell to pay.

Here I am in the Caribbean, (where they are "wild"), sitting, writing this article, my feet dangling in a hot tub with a pina colada in my hand. This big, 6-foot iguana just climbed down out of a tree, approached me, took my pina colada and drank it.

See what I mean? Iguanas are crazy. And they are only half way to domesticity.



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