

Keeping Tabs on Tegus

By Frederick Boyce

The teiidae is a New World family of about 170 species of fast-moving, mostly tropical, lizards with long plated tails and bodies that are typically covered with small granular scales. They are known collectively as the whiptails, and include the fleet racerunners; the splashy, colorful jungle runners; the iridescent ameivas; the snail-crunching caiman lizards; and the stout, heavily built tegus. Only one, the six-lined racerunner, is native to North Carolina. With a maximum length of 9.5 inches, including tail, it represents the smallest end of the teiid family spectrum, but if a current worrisome trend continues, it may at some point be joined in our state by the largest—the Argentine black and white tegu, also called the giant tegu.

Not exactly a Komodo dragon, with the largest males reaching a length of 4.5 feet, tegus are nonetheless much larger than any of our native lizards. Often described as “dog-sized,” they are powerfully built, and the males have a notable “jowly” appearance, much like a large male alligator. If you have ever watched the 1940 science fiction movie “One Million B.C.,” you have seen a black and white tegu and a South American caiman (alligator) portraying a pair of battling dinosaurs.

Tegus pose no direct threat to humans but will bite hard if restrained or cornered. In one case history of a bite in Brazil, which resulted in the loss of a fingertip, the lizard was raiding a poultry coop and was attacked by the owner’s dog. The man was bitten when he attempted to intervene.

Tegus are docile captives, however, known for their intelligence and responsive personalities, and are very popular with the exotic reptile crowd. A quick search on Facebook turned up at least three tegu-related groups, with the largest, THE TEGU-PHILE, having over 14K members.

Tegus of all sizes are standard fare at the numerous reptile shows and expos which take place regularly throughout the southeast, where large bins full of green-headed hatchlings are often on display. The conspicuous green color makes hatchling tegus easy to identify, but it fades within a few months. Any sighting of hatchlings in the wild, however, could indicate the presence of a breeding population. There are still no established populations known outside of Florida, but there is a concerted effort underway in Georgia, especially in Toombs and Tattnall counties, to trap the lizards in an attempt to contain the invasion early on.

Omnivores with voracious appetites, tegus pose the greatest threat to native wildlife and poultry. They are able to overpower and prey upon virtually anything smaller than themselves, and they also enjoy devouring low-hanging produce such as strawberries and grapes. They are particularly fond of eggs and pose a dire threat to ground-nesting birds and turtles, including sea turtles, and definitely poultry. In Venezuela, the tegu is known as “*el lobo pollero*” or “the chicken wolf.”* In Florida and Georgia, they have devoured the eggs of endangered gopher tortoises and displaced adult tortoises from their burrows.

As with all invasive species, tegus also have the potential to introduce foreign diseases and parasites to native animals. They are not particularly good climbers but are strong swimmers and can stay under water for extended periods, so they are well-adapted to live in coastal areas and could possibly reach barrier islands.

Whether they escaped or were released intentionally, tegus, like most non-native reptiles in the U.S., are here because of the exotic pet trade. With its

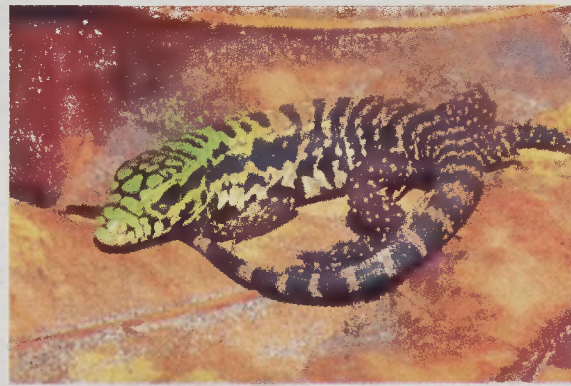
hospitable climate, Florida has long been a major port of entry for exotic animals and is now home to more non-native species than any other place on earth. Burmese pythons, being ideal headline fodder, have received a lion’s share of attention, but while these giant snakes certainly pose major ecological problems in the Everglades, they remain, for the most part, confined to the area south of Lake Okeechobee, being unable to survive the winters farther north.

Black and white tegus are much hardier, having a natural range that extends far south into temperate Argentina, and are thus already adapted to colder weather. Able to hibernate, as our native reptiles do, they are more likely to survive as far north as the Carolinas. According to the most recent information available from the NC Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC), four tegus were found in North Carolina and 11 in South Carolina in 2020, though it is unclear whether or not these were migrants or escaped captives. The latter case is much more likely, but should you happen to see a tegu (or any other strange animal that looks like it shouldn’t be here), try to get a photo and email it to HWI@ncwildlife.org. You can also call the Wildlife Helpline at 866-318-2401 or try contacting me at the NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores at 252-247-4003.

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*Rebecca Renner, *National Geographic*, Nov. 18, 2020. Other sources consulted for this article: georgiawildlife.com/teguas, evergladescisma.org/the-dirty-dozen/tegu-lizards, and *Wilderness and Environmental Medicine* 19, (2008) Journal



Tegu hatchling showing its green head (top) and a gaping tegu adult.

—Photos by Dustin Smith

