

Routine Handling of Pet Lizards

Our topics for this week are:

- **Small lizard handling compared to large lizard handling**
- **Defensive tactics with tails**
- **Signs of agitation in lizards**

Leopard geckos and bearded dragons are the easiest lizards for new owners of lizards to handle and manage. Other common small lizards that are relatively easy to handle include anoles, skinks, and chameleons.

Green iguanas are common lizard pets even though they are territorial, aggressive, have long claws, will bite, and a long muscular tail which they use to lash handlers if excited. Only experienced handlers should handle large iguanas.

Lizards are most comfortable if they can continue to move, or think they can move, at their own will. Holds that primarily provide support while the handler directs their continuing movements are most successful. Small, calm lizards are best held loosely and letting the lizard move from one hand to the other in a rolling hand movement.

Subdued lighting is helpful. Many lizards will become more difficult to handle and aggressive if in natural sunlight. A blanket or towel to cover a lizard's head may be used to assist in its capture and immobilization.

Small to Medium-Sized Lizards:

Unnecessary handling and restraint of lizards should be avoided. Small, docile lizards can be easily picked up and held in a palm and on an arm without any restraint. Care must be taken since small lizards that are not handled often may attempt to jump off the handler's hand. Tiny lizards like anoles or small geckos can be easily injured even with careful handling. When additional restraint is needed, a small lizard should never be restrained by its tail, which will break off, a process called tail autonomy. Most lizards are very fast and should be grasped around its shoulders and pelvis. This can be done with one hand for smaller lizards.

Small to medium-sized lizards (geckos, bearded dragons, uromastyx) accustomed to being handled can be grasped from above their body. The handler should move his hand slightly slower than normal to capture lizards. A lizard's shoulders and the pelvic area should be supported and restrained as needed to prevent the lizard from lashing and damaging its vertebrae.

Iguanas and Other Large Lizards

Arboreal lizards, such as green iguanas, have long claws to help them climb. Their claws can inflict serious injuries to handlers if the restraint applied does not prevent them from being able to rake their claws on the handler. Anytime a large lizard is captured, consideration should be given to trimming the nails to reduce risk of handler injury with further restraint. A blinder wrap can be helpful in trimming nails. The wrap is created by padding the eyes with cotton balls and wrapping the head with self-adhering elastic bandage material. When handling small to medium iguanas, a jacket or coat with thick sleeves should be worn to protect forearms from the long claws. Leather gloves with gauntlets and a jacket with long sleeves should be used if a larger lizard has long claws.

Handling Tame Iguanas

Well-handled iguanas may tolerate moderate handling without resistance. The lizard's tail is restrained under the handler's arm and against the handler's body.

To catch a calm iguana, approach the lizard from one of its sides. Reach over its body and place a hand under its chest. A natural tendency of arboreal lizards is to grab hold of the closest surface or object if being picked up. The feet should be promptly pulled loose with care not to injure the lizard's legs or feet while its body is lifted. Support the front of the body with the hand and forearm underneath its chest. The hand is held between the front legs with one finger between the legs. The abdomen and pelvis are supported on the forearm, the hind legs lie on both sides of the forearm and the upper portion of the arm pins the tail next to the handler's body. Larger lizards require the other hand to support the hindquarters (a two-hand hold) rather than the forearm of the hand supporting the chest and shoulders. The head is held away from the handler to avoid being bitten.

Handling Resistant Iguanas

Agitated iguanas require more firm handling methods. Signs of iguana agitation include sharply blowing air through the nose, pushing a hand away, going into a "C" posture to prepare for a tail slap, and if being picked up, doing a sudden "crocodile roll".

Handlers must exercise special care to control an iguana's long muscular tail. A defensive position they may take is to bend in a U shape to ready the tail to slash in defense. Capture of a defensive iguana involves grasping the base of the tail with one hand, lifting the hind legs off the floor, and then grasping the neck and shoulders with the other hand. Immediately after picking the iguana up, the handler should trap the tail between his forearm and body. Alternatively, the iguana can be captured using the "taco technique" with a towel and then wrapped in the towel like a burrito for restraint.

Towels can be used as hoods and wraps for capture of large lizards when needed. A noose can be made of thick cord to snare a lizard that quickly evades hand capture. Nets can be

used for capturing difficult cases. Posturing and other body language can signal aggression from a lizard. Defensive posturing can include tail whipping, head bobbing, opening the mouth wide, standing higher on all four legs, standing broadside, and extending their dewlap forward.

If a handler is bitten by a lizard, many lizards will not release, and their bite will intensify if the victim struggles. If being quiet and calm does not result in the lizard ending its bite, the lizard should be placed on the floor, with the victim lowering his body, if necessary. The lizard's attention should shift to letting go and attempting to escape or assuming a defensive posture in an attempt to scare the victim away. Other deterrent maneuvers by lizards can include spraying musk or urine and feces from the cloaca.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Lizards do not enjoy being handled and unnecessary handling should be avoided.**
- 2. Large lizards have dangerous claws that should be trimmed when the opportunity presents itself.**
- 3. Iguanas have large, muscular tails that must be restrained first when attempting to handle a large, agitated iguana.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 325 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.