

Handling Lizards and Transporting Reptiles

Our topics for this week are:

- Approaching, catching, and handling small and large lizards
- How to transport chelonians, lizards, and snakes

LIZARDS

Common pet lizards include central bearded dragons, anoles, skinks, iguanas, chameleons, and geckos. Leopard geckos and bearded dragons are the easiest lizards for new owners of lizards to handle and manage. Green iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) 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.

Approaching and Catching

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. Subdued lighting is helpful. Many lizards will become more difficult to handle and aggressive if in natural sunlight.

Well-handled iguanas may tolerate moderate handling without resistance. 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. In some cases, snares may be used to gain control of the head. When this is done, the tail must be quickly grasped as soon as the head is snared to prevent thrashing that could break the iguana's neck.

Handling for Routine Care and Management

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. Lizards are easily stressed by firm restraint and can be injured by tight restraint

A blanket or towel to cover a lizard's head may be used to assist in its capture and immobilization. Lizards used for research may be restrained with small clear plastic tubes for brief physical restraint similar to restraint tubes for rodents.

Small Lizards

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. Unnecessary handling and restraint should be avoided whenever possible. When additional restraint is needed, a small lizard should never be restrained only 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.

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.

If handled often, an iguana can be picked up by sliding a hand underneath its body and between its legs. The front end is supported with a hand below the thorax between the front legs and the rest of the torso rests on the handler's forearm. The lizard's tail is restrained under the handler's arm and against the handler's body. A slow, quiet approach is best. If the iguana becomes excited, it will grab whatever it can and hold on to prevent being picked up.

Another restraint for medium to large-sized lizards is to grasp them from above their back. The thumb and index finger is placed on the lower neck and three fingers behind one shoulder. The other hand restraining the pelvis is positioned with an index finger in front of a hindleg, the thumb behind the other hindleg, and three fingers on the base of the tail.

Leather gloves with gauntlets and a jacket with long sleeves should be used if a lizard has long claws. Towels can be used as hoods and wraps for capture 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.

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.

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. 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. Other deterrent maneuvers by lizards can include spraying musk or urine and feces from the cloaca.

TRANSPORTING REPTILES

Chelonians and Lizards

Opaque plastic storage boxes or tubs are the best means of transporting chelonians and lizards. If a chelonian is an aquatic species, it should have a moist towel under it and over it. Transporting lizards should be in plastic containers with tight lids and adequate ventilation.

Snakes

When moving snakes, a double-lined bag should be used to contain the snake, and the bag placed

in a plastic box. The bag should be canvas or cotton to allow ventilation. Pillowcases (breathable cotton) will suffice for most nonpoisonous snakes. Seams should be double stitched to prevent the snake's head from pushing a hole through a seam. Gentle snakes can be simply lifted into a transport bag. Transport bag openings should be tied off and the bag lifted and carried by the end of the knot to reduce the risk of being bitten through the bag. For added safety in bagging aggressive or poisonous snakes, the bag's neck can be placed through a triangular metal hoop at the end of a pole. This will hold the bag open without putting the handler's hands at risk. A snake hook is used to place the snake in the bag. The bag is removed from the hoop and the bag neck tied tightly with a cord.

Having a double bottom or stitched-cornered bag will protect the handler's hand from a bite if the bottom of the bag is grasped while removing the snake. The handler locates and grasps the snake's head using the bag as a shield. Then, the handler reaches into the bag and grasps the base of the head and then uses his other hand to lift the body as the snake is removed from the bag. Aggressive snakes are released from a head hold by removing the thumb and middle finger while the head is pressed down with the index finger which is then immediately removed to complete the release.

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

- Iguanas and other large lizards can be dangerous to handle and should only be caught and restrained by experienced handlers
- Lizards should never be held only by the tail
- Chelonians and lizards are best moved in plastic, ventilated containers with lids
- Snakes should be transported in double lined, breathable cloth bags

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at www.betteranimalhandling.com

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.