

Great Jumping



Alligators

How To Survive -- And Thrive -- In The World of Reptiles!

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Published by Browzer Books

One of my first assignments as a writer was to do a story about the Joe Hogan Fish Hatchery in Lonoke Arkansas. Besides fish the hatchery kept pets caught from some of the rice country around there. One such pet was a ninety four pound snapping turtle. Then they had two alligators, about six feet long each.

The alligators were kept in a big, tall tank. The photographer that went along with me to do the story had me hold the camera while she climbed up a ladder for a clear shot. She spent a few minutes at the top, peering down into the water. They were dead asleep? "Don't they move?" she asked. I snapped a picture of her. The flash went off and those alligators lunged upward in a surge of water.

That was the last time a photographer agreed to go with me on an assignment.

Most people think that alligators only live in the southeastern states of our country, like Louisiana and Florida. If that ever was true it isn't any longer. Alligators are found in Arkansas, Texas and Oklahoma. They could be raised commercially in Arizona and New Mexico too if someone wanted to give the job a whirl.

Most of the time alligators are pictured in frog-soup swamps too. While alligators do prefer sinking to the bottom of a body of water, they have no fear of treading on land. Many people in Florida have reported seeing alligators in the lakes near their backyards. Having a reptile the size of a small lizard in the backyard is normal, but seeing an alligator in a pond where your kids go wading every day is something to get disturbed about.

Alligators like to float along just beneath the surface of the water they are in, with only their eyes and nostrils breaking the surface of the water. The rest of their big body just relaxes underneath the water, legs spread apart and the huge tail hanging partway down. The alligator can float at exactly the right level by using his lungs as a kind of inflatable raft, and he keeps just the right amount of air for just his eyes to stay above the water level.

An alligator has two reasons for staying mostly under water. The first reason is to keep his body temperature cool. Like other reptiles, the alligator's body temperature depends upon the temperature of the air or water around him. The sun can get very hot in Florida, and since the alligator does not sweat, there has to be another way for him to keep cool. He first opens his enormous mouth to let cooler air in, and that will cool him down a little bit. If the alligator is still too hot, he will wade off into the water to lower his body temperature even more.

The second reason that an alligator stays in the water is to hide and wait for lunch to come by. Alligators can catch an amazing variety of animals to eat, including birds, fish, turtles, and even deer. They are quite at home in the water. They swim very quickly, and they can dive underwater and stay submerged for an hour, or even more. An alligator usually catches birds sitting on the water, but can raise itself up with a few powerful strokes of its tail to snatch one flying near the surface of the water, or as the bird is just taking off.

Female alligators are also known to use their formidable mouths to protect her babies. When baby alligators are born they can already catch their own food and swim, but they stay near their mother for a year or more in order to be safe from predators.

Even before they are born, the mother alligator stays near the nest she dug in the dirt to keep others (like turtles) from eating her eggs. When the eggs are ready to hatch, the babies inside the eggs start making noises. Some babies come out of the eggs by themselves, but other eggs are so tough they must be taken into the mother alligator's mouth, where she gently rolls them around until the baby alligator can come out of the hard shell.

You used to be able to buy baby alligators at souvenir shops in Florida, but now alligators are protected and highly regulated in that state. Anyone who keeps an alligator captive in Florida must have special licenses -- and must really know what he or she is doing!

In Texas and other places alligators can be raised commercially and people in the know declare they are rich delicacies when served in high class restaurants.

Baby alligators can still be bought in many pet stores that offer exotic pets. These are store-bought babies, meaning they were not caught in the wild. When they are still little babies, alligators make wonderful pets and they are even beautiful. But what are you going to do with that baby when it gets to be four feet long and able to swallow a baby pig in a single gulp?

Alligators are numbered among the reptiles. Charles Darwin believed that reptiles evolved from amphibians because of a necessity to adjust to life on land. This brought about the need for legs and lungs to breathe air. Snakes are reptiles too, but they are legless, able to crawl along with their magnificent bodies. The scaly reptile skin was necessary to protect the bodies from the rough surface of the ground, a much harsher environment from the smooth water amphibians were used to.

Science has identified over 7,000 species of reptiles, even going so far as to claim birds as a part of the reptile group because of the inherited characteristics such as their skeletons, internal organs, and DNA. Birds are different in that they have feathers and they are called endotherms, meaning they must have food for energy to keep themselves warm.

What we know as reptiles are ectotherms. That means they need an outside heat source to help them retain proper body temperature. Many people believe that reptiles cannot move when it gets too cold. But I have personally seen dozens of turtles come up from the center of an ice covered pond (Ice melts in the center first when ponds are large) and crawl hundreds of feet over the ice, then disappear into the loose snow.

Crocodiles are in the second oldest group of reptiles, perhaps resembling the dinosaur relatives more closely than any other reptile group. However, scientists believe the turtle is the out and out winner in the oldest proven reptile group. They say turtles are even older than the dinosaurs that roamed the earth!

There are two groups of turtles; one group fares best on land and the other in water. The one that fares best on land is the terrestrial tortoise. Terrapins in deserts don't even need water to drink; they get that from the brush, grass and twigs they eat. Turtles that live primarily in the water love to eat meat and will tear the legs right off of floating ducks. But, if you are going to trap a turtle in the water the best bait is watermelon.

People who catch fish out of rivers with stationary traps quite often trap turtles too. They have gone into the trap to catch those poor fish that couldn't get away. Turtles usually command higher prices than do the fish anyway so the fishermen are just as happy.

Turtles don't have any teeth to chew their food with but their mouth is like a beak. They are so strong that if they can just get a good bite on something it usually gets cut clean through. The Alligator "Snapping" Turtle has more gap between the two halves of shell than other turtles. When you pick one of them up by the tail they can bring their head all the way around and bite your hand. When I was doing a story on harvesting fish one of these "bad boys" showed up in the net.



The fisherman in charge showed me that not only could it bite its own tail, and that once it takes a bite on something too hard to snap through you can kill the turtle before it will let go of it.

The Alligator Snapping Turtle can get big enough to have a shell more than two feet in length. Some of them weigh up to two hundred pounds. A word to the wise should be sufficient, keep your hands clear of this critter.

Of all the reptiles that can be found in your neighborhood, turtles are probably the easiest to catch. One of the most interesting parts of the turtle is the most obvious, its shell. The back of a turtle shell is formed from bones that have fused together into a hard structure. On top of the bone layer are large scales that cover and protect the surface of the bone, and give the turtle its distinctive color. This "shell" is not an impervious substance. Some people are mean enough to carve their initials into a turtle's shell, and others carve the date. Many turtles die because of this cruelty, others survive.

Some sea turtles have shells with bones that are separated, and the Leatherback Turtle has no scales at all, just leathery skin with little bony plates distributed in its skin. The shells of land turtles are typically quite high and round, in order to discourage predators from attempting to crush the shells in their mouths.

Water turtles generally have much flatter shells, in order to allow for faster swimming. The bottom of the shell, called the plastron, is also fused bone, but it is covered with a different kind of scale, in order for the turtle to move easily over its territory. A few turtles, such as the American box turtle, have hinges on the bottom of its shell. The box shell turtle can withdraw into the shell and then close the hinges, so that no predator can reach any of the turtle within. These hinges also protect against moisture loss on particularly dry days.

Like many other reptiles, turtles lay their eggs on land. Baby turtles generally grow rapidly until they reach young adulthood, and then the rate of growth slows. Large turtles often keep growing at a slow rate for their entire life.

The shells of most turtles grow to be at least five inches in diameter, and the monster of the turtle family (the Leatherback) can have a shell six feet long -- and it can weigh up to fifteen hundred pounds.

It is easier to tell the age of turtles than most other reptiles because the plates on their back often have growth rings, similar to trees. Each time a turtle stops growing it creates a depression in each scale, and so these can be counted to determine the age of the turtle.

A number of turtles have lived for more than one hundred years as pets, and turtles might be the longest-lived vertebrates, with life spans up to two hundred years. Like I said, some American families have carved their names and dates into box turtle shells, and these markers indicate that even local turtles can live to be more than one hundred years old.

Small turtles do make good pets provided you have a container for them that gives them adequate room to move around in. It does look cute to see turtles basking in the sun on a log in a pond. But your pet turtle will also need a source of heat to stay alive. Too much heat is also as bad as too little.

Consequently, designing a turtle habitat for your pet is not as simple as purchasing a ready-made fish tank from the pet store. It needs both a place to crawl around on, and a water area to swim in. Turtles are avid swimmers. In fact, they prefer and usually insist on feeding only in water. Most of the turtles you have seen were probably sunning themselves on a log for turtles are religious baskers. It is harder to spot a swimming turtle because usually all they have up above the water is the very tip of their nose. They look very much like a water snake while swimming like this. The habitat you build for your pet should provide enough space for a pool deep enough to comfortably swim in -- and offer a large dry area where they can doze off clear out of the water and sun themselves.

All water turtles can be fed by dropping earthworms into the water, but they also love to nibble on raw chicken cut up in tiny chunks. When their interest in food starts to drop off you should quit giving them any more. A (slightly) hungry turtle is a happy turtle.

If your back yard has a chain link fence you can just turn land turtles loose and let them live as they please. They won't even know they are pets until you pick them up.

Success in keeping any reptile for a pet depends much on your climate. You can forget sticking your pet snake, turtle, or lizard outside in a cage or pen or aquarium if you live in a cold climate. Keeping the pet in a controlled temperature is essential to its survival. Digestion depends on the right temperature and so does the animal's ability to move around successfully.

Back when I walked seven miles to school I picked up a little sidewinder (rattlesnake) and put it inside my lunch bucket. At school I had been hearing how snakes hibernate during the winter and I thought this was a wonderful opportunity to conduct a scientific experiment and see if they really did hibernate.

Therefore I put the lunch bucket inside the freezer compartment with the sidewinder still inside it. Then I went to change my clothes. When I came back to see how my pet was doing my mother had just opened the freezer and was pulling the lid off my lunch bucket. The sidewinder had not yet cooled down enough to hibernate and it came out of that bucket like Quaker Puffed Rice shooting from a gun. Not only had my mother interrupted an important scientific experiment, when she got done with me Mama had changed the course of history and I never did become an herpetologist.

Be that as it may, reptiles have existed right alongside human beings for centuries. Old temples have been discovered in Africa with snakes carved into the walls, indicating pythons had a sacred significance over a period of many years. Snake charmers in India have made a living with swaying cobras for centuries too.

Of all the reptiles in the zoo and other professional places, the public is usually most attracted to the largest ones - alligators, crocodiles, komodo dragons, and of course, the big snakes.

Some snakes have songs written about them, and one anaconda was even the star of a movie! Boas have been known to live over forty years at a time in zoos! Anacondas have been feared in South America for a long time. Any snake that can grow to over 35 feet deserves a wide berth!

The largest of the big snakes is the anaconda, which has been reported to grow to thirty-seven feet long. You can't realize how long a reptile this is until you measure from your room down the hallway, probably well into the living room. A truly enormous snake, and one of the longest reptiles ever! This snake spends most of its time in the water hiding in the water plants of South America.

The other four giant snakes are pythons, and are found in Africa and Asia. They grow to between 22 feet and 32 feet, depending on the species. If you see a python in a zoo or other animal show, it is probably a reticulated python from Southeast Asia. It was picked out due to its beautiful color pattern and the fact that it does well living in captivity.

Many giant snakes can live up to twenty years in captivity. When they are young they are quite vulnerable and can be eaten by hawks or other predators that eat smaller snakes, but no animal would even try to threaten much less eat a full grown snake of this kind.

The giant snakes are so big they really can swallow a man whole! Very few cases of that have been reported though. Once a giant snake has had a large supper, it would be the same as if it ate four hundred average sized meals. This means that sometimes these reptiles might go a long time between meals, maybe as infrequently as once a year.

The giant snakes have extremely strong muscles, and use them both in movement and in hunting their prey. Their jaws are also very strong, but that isn't as important as how wide their mouths open in order to eat their prey. Generally the giant snakes kill their prey before the snake begins to swallow them. The giant snakes rely on squeezing their prey (which is why they are often called constrictors), but they generally squeeze only hard enough to prevent the prey

from breathing sufficiently, and eventually suffocate the prey. They do not need nor do they intend to squeeze hard enough to crush or break bones, as people sometimes think.

A constrictor throws several coils around the main body of its prey, very neatly. Every time the animal takes a breath the snake simply applies a little more pressure. Finally the prey can no longer breathe and it expires. There are stories of giant snakes breaking bones in order to "fold" a victim in two in order to swallow it more easily.

Many snake handlers consider the giant snakes to be quite intelligent, and find that the giant snakes are easily handled and come to recognize and accept their trainers. They are among the most fascinating of reptiles, and make sure you visit them if they are in a nearby zoo or other naturalist area.

Burmese pythons can certainly become tame enough to make good pets; however, the cute little baby will grow into a very huge adult. The size alone, once it is grown, will make it less suitable to keep as a pet. The African Rock Python and the Reticulated Python have been known to be kept as pets, but their temperament makes it more of a challenge. Just because they are so cute as babies, it doesn't mean they will still be appealing as adults. The price should not be your only decision in owning one of these reptiles. Pet shops will often sell low cost animals that often turn into high cost maintenance, which certainly enhances the chance of return business. But it is really unfair to the unsuspecting consumer.

Imported reptiles such as the pythons are often sold with problems that occurred before or during transport. The prospective owner must be well-educated to be able to spot any deficiencies in the animal prior to purchase. Mites, ticks, dehydration and emaciation are some of the possible problems.

Green anoles are sold at a low cost, but their set up can be expensive. Anoles tend to be caught wild which means parasite infestation is more likely; and they don't like to be handled.

Wild-caught ball pythons are known to have heavy parasite infestation and are picky eaters. Their stress during shipping causes trauma, which affects their temperament, appetite, and overall health. Captive hatched or farm raised are still imported and still suffer from shipping distress. When it is all said and done, the only real enemies of these great reptiles are intestinal parasites, diseases, and man.

How do regular snakes compare with these giants? Most other snakes are much smaller, and very few even grow to be twelve feet long. Some snakes never exceed a foot in length. Your "average snake" is less than six feet long.

Snakes do tend to make good pets when adequately fed. Garter snakes are easily caught and usually make great pets. My own favorite pet snake is the king snake. I am especially fascinated in watching a king snake cross a body of water. He stays right on top of the water and he does not jerk his way across (like a rattlesnake would).

Once a king snake makes a curve with his head the rest of his body follows right along as if it were in a grooved track, nothing varying. We gave one king snake the run of the house and never intentionally fed it or watered it.

When we lost that one I was on the lookout for a king snake to take his place. One day I saw one just after it had seen me and darted down into a hole. I caught it by the tail and tried to pull it from the hole. The king snake was stronger than I was. There was a plow carrier right close so I tied the snakes tail to the reel and tightened it until the snake was taut. I waited a few minutes for the king snake to wear itself out trying to stay in the hole against that pressure. Nothing doing, so I decided to let it stay that way until it did give out and I went on into the house.

When I came out the next morning, expecting to see my king snake dangling from the chain I found instead only half a snake. My pet king snake had pulled itself in half. I don't know if all snakes will do that but I do know that one did.



When you watch a snake move, think about how it uses its ribs and muscles to move so differently than any other animal. Snakes can move very fast, so don't be surprised if it slithers off quickly as soon as it realizes you are there. Be very quiet! Two of the snakes that are found throughout nearly all of the United States are the garter snake and the hognosed snake. Garter snakes are very thin snakes, about the size of two or three pencils, and about as long as your arm. They have long stripes on their bodies, the stripes are yellow and dark green in the eastern US, red-orange in the western US. Look for them in grassy fields or in grasses near the edge of woods, especially in sunny spots where they can get warm.

Hognose snakes have funny turned up noses that they can use for digging, and that is how they get their name. They are big brownish or greyish snakes with darker colored blotches on their bodies. They like open sandy areas, and areas with a lot of fallen leaves on it. Hognose snakes have unusual behaviors when they feel threatened. If you get too close to a hognose, it may try to scare you by hissing at you and puffing out its head. If it feels really scared, it can flop over and play dead.

All snakes are cold-blooded, they move in very unusual ways, and they have more old wives' tales about them than nearly any other animal (except maybe the wolf). Observing a rattlesnake might be easier than other snakes, for its major senses are its sense of smell, detection of vibration, and heat detection. YES, a rattlesnake CAN see heat in the dark.

Much of a rattlesnake's waking hours is consumed by waiting for food. Since they are slower than most snakes they get their food by sitting and waiting, rather than chasing after their prey. Several nights may go by when no potential prey comes near, and so a rattler needs to be patient. He comes out as the sun is setting and the desert begins to cool, and slides across sand and several rocks until he finds an area that smells strongly of rodents, or perhaps a hunting area that has been successful for him in the past. The rattler coils up in some low vegetation, or near the side of a rock.

The top several inches of his body are not coiled, but have a few shallow bends in his neck so that he can strike quickly when prey comes by. His head rests on his coiled body. If no prey comes by, eventually the rattler's body temperature gets low enough that he needs to make a return journey, and so the rattler will make the return journey at that time.

When a small animal appears, for example a desert mouse, the rattler may be alerted by the vibrations made as the mouse scurries along the ground. Its tongue will pick up the scent of the mouse, and there are extremely sensitive organs of smell in the roof of a rattler's mouth. In order to determine where to strike in the dark, the rattler uses the pits on its head. These pits determine where the heat source, the mouse, is. If the mouse is slightly too far away to strike, the rattler will slowly and quietly move in a straight line toward the mouse, so that the mouse will not detect any sound or movement. The snake normally does not use the normal side to side motion for stalking prey, as it attracts too much attention. When the mouse is close enough, the rattler strikes. As it strikes, its mouth opens wide and the fangs drop down and forward, so that the fangs point directly at the mouse. As its mouth closes on the mouse, the venom is pumped through its fangs into the mouse. The snake then reopens its mouth and lets the mouse go.

After a few minutes the snake assumes the mouse has died, and moves around using its tongue to smell for the location of the mouse's body. If you look at a snake after it has eaten, you can usually see a small (or large) bump that gradually decreases as it progresses into the stomach.

The time the snake takes from first noticing the mouse to swallowing it may be as long as an hour.

Compared to lizards and turtles or tortoises, many snakes tend to be easier pets for kids to raise. Just make sure your child is old enough to be properly educated in the handling of the reptile for the child's safety and the reptile's safety as well.

Remember that every year there are more people die by being bitten by non-poisonous snakes than from being bitten by the poisonous ones.

When it comes to housing your pet snake you need to know if it is basically a water snake or a land snake. Like preparing for turtles, even if you have a water snake you do need to provide a place for your pet to get out of the water.

Dry snakes prefer DRY living quarters. They like to have holes to hide in and a log or limb will provide them a place to sun bathe. If you aren't sure how to prepare bedding for your snake, take a stroll through the reptile section of the zoo. If there is a herpetologist on hand, ask him or her for advice.

A word of warning: because reptiles carry salmonella, it is essential that any person who handles the creature either wear gloves or wash their hands thoroughly clean immediately after putting the reptile back into its housing.



Lizards are a proud group of reptiles. Most of them want to be left alone and some of them INSIST on it. But many lizards are also easily trained and domesticated. You catch a lizard right behind the head, preferably with your thumb applying pressure on the head. They travel well, generally, and they seem to take great pleasure in clinging onto your shoulder as you walk around. Given any kind of a chance though, and your pet lizard is gone, wild again.

A word of Warning: Lizards CAN jump. When the man in the moon was just a little boy I caught a dozen Gila Monsters. These are SLOW, sluggish lizards and they are poisonous. Because they are so slow they are easily caught, if you're quiet. Incidentally, Gila Monsters prefer boiled eggs to anything else I fed them.

Anyway, my dad went ballistic on me when he found out I had a dozen "protected" animals in captivity. He insisted that I take them out into the desert and let them loose. Well, he was bigger than I was and so he got his way, as usual back then.



Gila Monsters are pink with black beads on their upper body. Back then most of them were fat as pigs. I had this dozen of them in a wooden cage where they were getting even fatter. I reached in and grabbed them one at a time and put them into a wash tub.

When all of them were in the tub I carried them out into the desert, set the tub down, and tipped it over. Off they crawled, slow, sluggish and in no hurry whatsoever. Never one to leave well enough alone I decided to catch one of them again, just for the fun of it. As I bent over to pick it up that Gila Monster leaped straight up from the ground towards my hand. My instincts for survival were quite strong back then and I jumped back out of the way just as quickly as it jumped towards me.

For years and years it was sworn to me on a stack of Bibles that Gila Monsters do NOT jump; I was wrong. Finally, just a few years ago I met a fellow in Hot Springs who was a great reptile collector. He brought up a story of one night when he determined to catch a Gila Monster by throwing a toss sack over it. That sack jumped and wiggled until the Gila Monster came out from under it, then it went on the attack and chased my friend around his car. So, maybe they do look slow, but they can go.

Gila Monsters are venomous, but they have to hold on and grind their teeth into you to excrete their poison. An old Indian told me the story of seeing a wild horse with a Gila Monster hanging from its forehead. "Three years later I saw that same horse and it still had the Gila Monster hanging from its forehead." That has been more than fifty years ago and ever since then, even though I know that story couldn't be true, any time I see a horse in the wild I look to see if it has a Gila Monster hanging on it. That is the way the old Indians there taught lessons so they would be remembered forever.

The biggest lizard around is the alligator. They live only in the southern United States. Most common lizards are between four and twelve inches long, which is about the length of one or two of your hands. If they see you looking for them, lizards will probably scurry away quickly, so approach them from behind, and do so quietly.

Some lizards can go as fast as fifteen miles per hour, about as fast as you can ride your bicycle, and very fast for a reptile! One really interesting thing about some lizards is that if another animal grabs their tail, the tail breaks off, and later the lizard grows a new one!

All lizards typically have smooth dry skin, so do not worry about them being slimy. One of the more common lizards all across the U.S. is the skink, which has a nice round body, short stubby legs, and is very shiny. Look for skinks during the warm part of the day in areas that no one goes near, like groups of rocks in a vacant lot. Many skinks have long stripes along their bodies, and a solid color pink or blue tail!

What types of reptiles are popular as exotic pets? Snakes, lizards and turtles make your choices extremely wide. There are some, however, of each type that makes some better choices than others.

Unfortunately, these types of pets are also the most often abused and neglected simply because of failure to learn about their proper needs prior to ownership. Once the new wears off of them, they become forgotten. Because reptiles are often quiet and contained, it is easy to forget they are around.

Corn snakes are often chosen because they are known to be easier to care for. They are excellent escape artists, though, so great care must be taken to keep the latches tightly closed on their enclosures. It may seem funny in the movies to see a snake escape and scare the family or guests, but if you ever step on a snake in the dark it can give you a heart attack. It can also cause great harm to your pet .

Boas are a well-known reptile pet, but people often underestimate their lifespan and their great size when grown. A snake kept in an area it has outgrown will not be a happy, well-adjusted pet. It may cause the snake harm and you as well, should he choose to fight back because of his discomfort.

Snakes are well-known and feared reptiles. Many people simply misunderstand the snake and lump them all together. Snakes benefit the balance of nature.

They consume rodents, amphibians, and insects as well as providing a source of food to other animals like hawks and eagles, not to mention other snakes. They're valuable additions to our animal world because of their importance as predators and as prey.

Many people kill snakes without knowing whether or not they are dangerous. Some snakes are "good" snakes in the way that they kill the bad snakes. Without an abundance of snakes the mice population could explode and bring pestilence and disease to the human family as it has many times in the past. Just because you may be scared of something does not mean it is less important to our world.

Have you ever struck out in fear, by instinct or reflex? Sometimes a reptile is forced to do the same thing in order to survive. It doesn't stop to think first because the time to think could cost it a life.

Snakes do not strike out because they hate humans, lizards do not bite because they are holding a grudge, snapping turtles do not snap because they don't like the blouse you decided to wear today. A reptile attacks because it feels threatened or because it is hungry.

If you live in an area where the venomous snake population is higher than normal or maybe your chance of coming into contact with such is higher, you may want to purchase a Sawyer Pump Extractor. This handy little machine suctions out the venom from the bite, reducing your chances of more serious illness or death.

There are some helpful do's and don'ts to know once you've been bit. Of course, you should get away from the snake first. Although it is scary, you will be less affected if you can make yourself stay as calm as possible. Remove jewelry that may become binding should your arm or hand swell from a bite. Wrap a wide band of material or elastic bandage above the bite area and leave in place until proper medical help is achieved. Do not wrap this too tightly. Alert an emergency center of your upcoming visit if possible.

Don't take any alcohol or drugs as this may interfere with your treatment once you arrive at the medical center. It could also inhibit your ability to get there if you are forced to drive yourself. Applying ice or electric shock of any kind is not advised.

It will help to pay attention to the kind of reptile that bit you so that you can relate the information to the medical personnel when you get help. It may help them identify your needs quicker.

The two largest rattlesnakes, on average, are the eastern and western diamondbacks. The average length of an adult eastern diamondback is around four feet, and the average length of a western diamondback is about three and a half feet. There are reports of diamondbacks that were more than ten feet. The largest ones that have actually been measured have been just under eight feet long. A six-foot rattler can weigh as much as 11 pounds. Generally reptiles are not thought of as beautiful animals, but a rattler has many wonderful designs to look at. The eastern diamondback, with a general pattern of grey brown diamonds all along its body, has a raccoon-like black mask over its eyes. The Santa Catalina rattlesnake (found only on Santa Catalina Island) has markings similar to heavy eyebrows above its eyes.

One thing that fascinates me about rattlesnakes is that their babies are born live, and they can hide in Mama Rattlesnake's mouth if danger threatens. Another fascinating feature of a rattler is the pits seen on either side of the face. These are not related to the venom glands, but are organs that detect radiant heat. The snakes use these to detect things that are close by and are warmer than the general surroundings. In this way, the pits can help locate of small animals such as mice even when they think they are hidden in the dark. Since these reptiles have poor eyesight, they use the pits and their sense of smell to determine where their next lunch is coming from.

The most noticeable feature of the rattlesnake is the rattle itself, since rattles are not found on any other reptiles. In one school break I killed forty two rattlesnakes and kept the rattles on a string around my neck as proof of my prowess.

Unfortunately, every time I took a jarring step, they rattled. That often scared the dickens out of me and it wasn't long before I rid myself of that trophy.

The rattles are made of the same substance that forms horns, claws, and our fingernails. The "fingernail" at the tip of the tail forms a rattle, and when the snake sheds its skin, this part does not come entirely off, forming a new rattle. A few snakes have been found that have as many as twenty-three rattles on their tail.

Reptiles, and snakes in particular, have very unusual ways to get around. A rattler can use the muscles in its body to push against small irregularities, or bumps, in the surface of the ground. As the snake goes by, each part of the snake pushes against the bump so that it looks like the standard snake "wiggle".

The bumps may not seem very visible to us, and it might just be a slightly thicker than usual clump of grass in a grassy field. But what happens if a western diamondback is caught on a flat rock with nothing to push against? In this case, it uses the scales on its belly, and uses them in the same way a multi-legged caterpillar uses its feet. This motion is much slower, but is also quieter, and is used by rattlers to silently get their prey within striking distance.

Wild-caught chameleons are an antisocial creature even without the added negative aspects caused by shipping, so a beginning reptile owner would find this animal a disappointing challenge. They suffer stress, parasite, and crowding from being imported as well. They don't react well to everyday household noises -- like children, other animals, vacuum cleaners, loud radios, and so on. It's not even a guarantee that they'll be happy when housed with other chameleons either because they aren't even sociable with their own kind.

Any large reptiles need large cages or other enclosures. They will also need bedding, a water source, tunnel logs, rocks, trees, steps, plants, a ground cover of some sort for the bottom of their enclosure, and more food than a small pet. The costs can add up before you realize it!

But once you have taken care of the initial investment, the big worry lies in being able to provide the proper amount and type of food and bedding. Vet care should also be considered. If you can't afford to have the reptile treated, you may want to pass on adding it to your home.

Whatever your choice of lizard or other reptile as a pet, you will want to do your research before you purchase. If you are given the animal as a gift, please educate yourself as quickly as possible to prevent unintentional harm to the reptile.



The exotic pet trade is big business that uses clever marketing techniques to snare people's interest in reptiles. Some people are convinced they want the exotic pet as a hobby, a novelty item, or a status symbol. It may present the element of class or style they mistakenly wish to portray. Unfortunately, the animal is the one that suffers when the interest has grown dim, and the excitement has worn off.

It's really better for the reptile as well to purchase one that is born in captivity than to remove one from its natural environment and thrust it into captivity.

You can, of course, take your chances and get a pet from an advertisement in a newspaper. Many times this is a great way to get a good deal on the cage and accessories as well as starter food for the pet. Some people sell their pets in garage sales. Sometimes people set up an area in a parking lot to display their pet. Remember you are taking your chances on the health of the pet, on any diseases the pet may be able to spread to you as well. Hopefully, you will already have a good idea of what the pet and all it comes with would cost should you purchase it all new so that you won't get ripped off.

Big well-known flea markets have been known to carry reptiles and accessories. Regulars keep booths on a regular basis, so that returning to ask questions may not be a problem. Be sure to ask if the seller is a regular at the flea market or how you may contact him/her if not. You could order your reptile from a magazine ad or perhaps from an online source. Many times a popular mall will have a pet shop as well, or there could be one nearby.

To learn about the reptile and its needs, check out books at the local library. Check for others in your area who may already own a reptile of your interest so that you can get pointers and advice from someone experienced. There may be groups in your area for exotic pet owners. You'll need to know who these people take their reptile to for injuries or illness, too.

Be aware that just because a pet shop has a certain pet for sale, does not mean the owner or salesclerk is an expert in the care and special needs of that particular animal. Do your own research beforehand, no matter where you choose to purchase your reptile!

It is illegal in many places to hold a reptile captive, even if you consider yourself to be taking good proper care of the animal. You may need a license or permit to be able to take care of it, even if you are trying to "save" it because of obvious injury or illness. It is best to contact [a wildlife rehabilitator](#) any time you see a wild animal in distress. If you can't find a wildlife rehabilitator, perhaps you could call a game warden or a nearby zoo or vet for further aid.

Collection and transport of reptiles can cause damage or trauma. This may make the reptile more apt to strike out in defense upon any close contact. Would you be a bit annoyed if someone removed you against your will to put you in an unfamiliar place? It is best for the animal if it is allowed to stay in the environment to which it is accustomed when possible.

I guess I have caught more wild critters than most. Especially during my youth I found it impossible to resist catching anything that was trying to get away from me. Then I'd get it home and keep it for a few days and, "What in the world did I catch this thing for?"

If you can't resist the urge to capture a wild reptile and later decide it wasn't such a good idea after all, please contact someone who would be qualified to take over its care. Wildlife animal refuges and zoos are equipped for the care of reptiles and may be happy to assist to keep the animal alive and well.

If you know of a reptile that is being abused or neglected because of improper care or treatment, you could try contacting a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals.

Your local veterinarian's office, game warden, zoo, or animal shelter should be able to direct you to the right phone number or address of the nearest office for complaints. Should you be uncomfortable with providing your name, make that fact known from the start. "I'm not going to give you my name, but --"

It is understandable to want to keep yourself protected from an irritable owner caught by authorities for cruelty. But please, don't let this stop you from helping the poor unwilling creature. There are ways to protect yourself and reach out to get help.

Safety with reptiles is not just about safety for the humans who are interested in handling the reptiles. It's also about the safety of the reptiles themselves.

Basically, any reptile that is caught in the wild is discouraged for use as a pet. It is cruel for a reptile to be removed from its natural environment, for it to be thrust into captivity against its will, just so someone can say they own it as a pet. If you must have a reptile for a pet, buy one that was raised or born in captivity.

Other reptiles which do not make good pets, especially for a beginner, are Tokay geckos, caymans, and alligators. They are quick, aggressive, and very strong animals. Make sure you know what you're getting before you invest your hard-earned money into the cute little pet shop reptile!

Reptiles can be great pets. But, many reptiles are purchased for pets for the wrong reasons. Sometimes a reptile is bought out of spite towards another family member.

Sometimes a reptile is purchased as merely a show-piece to impress others. Maybe owning an exotic pet makes the person feel more important somehow, more interesting, more dangerous. But many people just don't know what they're getting into because they don't research properly beforehand.

First, you must know the laws in your state for owning an exotic pet. In Australia, for example, you need a license to keep a native reptile in captivity. You'll need to know if you're allowed to obtain a reptile from even your own backyard. This is also considered the wild, as it is a natural environment. A reptile keeper or a pet shop may be the only places to legally obtain a reptile to keep as a pet.



Snakes are probably the species of reptiles that fascinate and repel us the most. One of the most visited booths at any outdoor show is the reptile area, with the little kids standing around and squealing at one special area - the area where the rattlesnakes are kept. There are about thirty different species of rattlers, and all of them live in America.

Milking rattlesnakes has been a popular sideshow item for many years at local fairs and county shows.

You should plan on spending at least \$100 for the corn snake aquarium, rocks, heat source, water dish, and two pieces of indoor/outdoor carpet for the floor. The carpet is the most economical investment for bedding as it can be washed and reused, keeping one piece clean at all times. The corn snake itself can cost from \$20 to \$350, depending on what type you choose.

Pet care books are available at local libraries. But if you can't find the one you want, they cost less than \$10 even in most pet stores and can be purchased at local discount stores. Filters for turtle aquariums can cost from \$18 to \$30. Food for iguanas can become costly as they need fresh fruits and vegetables on a regular basis in addition to food you can purchase in dried form. A 40 ounce container of Iguana Juvenile pellets costs around \$16.

Bedding for all reptiles must be kept clean to avoid disease from overexposure to its own urine and feces. The cost can start at \$2.50 and rise depending on where you purchase and what you prefer. Just keep in mind that not all bedding is safe for all animals. Replacement will depend on the size of the housing, the size of your reptile, and how many reptiles you own.

If you have a reptile that climbs, you may need a fresh air habitat with a mesh screen and water resistant bottom. The small ones can cost around \$30 for one that stands 20 inches tall or \$80 for one that stands 30 inches tall.

Lighting costs about \$18 for a 10 inch clamp-on lamp that dims. A combination lamp can cost \$48. An infrared heater can cost \$23. There's also the cost of the electricity needed to run the environmental equipment.

Other items you may need to price are huts for hiding, chemical additives for the water-dwellers, pumps, liners, netting, stands, bulbs, sterilizers, and algae scrapers. If it seems overwhelming, take your time to digest the information and make the best decision. It's not fair to the pet to provide less than adequate housing and other needs.

Dangers exist when keeping reptiles as pets, but not just as bites and scratches. You can also contract salmonella disease from not washing your hands after coming into contact with the feces or urine or touching something that has. It's important to keep your hands away from your face, food, or food preparation areas or utensils until you've properly washed and disinfected your hands.

Salmonella can be transferred to your countertops from the reptile's feet, so allowing the little bugger to walk on in your kitchen, on your dining table, or even near your toothbrush is inadvisable. Mild infection of salmonella includes diarrhea, fever, and stomach cramps. More severe infection happens if the germs travel to the bloodstream, bone marrow, or nervous system.

Other diseases that can be passed to you from reptiles are toxoplasmosis, Lyme disease, rabies, or chronic fatigue syndrome. These diseases are known as zoonotic diseases, those which can be passed from animal to animal or animal to human. It is important to understand that reptiles are not the only animals that transmit these diseases, so there's no need to panic just because you weren't aware of them before you bought the reptile. Lyme disease is passed by tick bites, and you can get ticks from walking through tall grass!

Proper handling of your reptile is the most important issue to keep diseases from being passed to you or your loved ones. So, make sure you educate your children on the importance of proper handling and hand washing. If you aren't sure they are old enough to understand, it is best if you keep the reptile away from the child's reach at all times. The temptation of touching the reptile or putting their hands in the cage just might be too much for them to resist.

Besides the risk of diseases being transferred to humans, the reptiles themselves can suffer from several diseases. Mites, ticks, worms, rickets, osteoporosis, fungal diseases, bacterial diseases, anemia, depression, or anorexia are just a few. There's also a disease known to attack lizards called metabolic bone disease. It's very painful for the reptile and is often caused by lack of calcium.

Improper ultraviolet radiation also causes the reptile problems because of the inability to release vitamin D3, which enables proper absorption of calcium. The symptoms of this disease are brittle bones, swollen jaws, swollen legs, recessed jaws, and no energy. Just imagine how horrible it must feel!

Other problems reptiles can encounter are mouth rot, skin disease from improper shedding, organ bleeding from an overdose of vitamins, colds, and respiratory infections. Central nervous systems can suffer with vitamin B1 deficiency. A female reptile can acquire overloaded ovaries or post ovulatory eggs, which could require surgery.

This is why you must take your animal's welfare seriously. If you are well-armed with knowledge on how to care for it, the chances of it contracting or becoming worse from disease is much reduced. Of course, you have much less control over something the reptile may have had prior to your care. This is where it will help to have some background on the history of the pet shop where you decide to purchase. It also helps to know what to look for to spot some problems before you purchase!

People have all kinds of different pets. Some people only feel safe with what is considered "normal" pets. This usually consists of cats, dogs, hamsters, or birds. Country folks may have farmyard animals for pets. Horses, cows, goats, bunnies, and so on are typical.

Then you have the people who pride themselves on being "outside the norm". These people may be the sort who likes to consider themselves and their pets unique. Or maybe they just love animals of all kinds and welcome any and all types as pets. Reptiles have been kept as pets for many years, but as the number of pet stores has grown so has the number of reptiles kept as pets. Sometimes this is bad news for the reptiles. If a dangerous reptile is chosen, it could be bad news for the owner as well.

Sometimes the type of pet a person has depends on the area in which they live. Availability may make the choice for them. Environment is also a consideration.

In south Louisiana, a child may be raised thinking an alligator is normal to keep for a pet! It would be impractical for a child who lives in the midst of the city to own a pet cow.

Those cute little reptiles grow up and will need different requirements for food and housing as they grow. A responsible pet owner will be prepared for the changes and willing to accommodate. Can you recreate the natural environment and maintain it? Think of it as being a person from the country who moves to the city, unwillingly, and never learns to adjust because they just don't seem to fit into the new surroundings. Except this person has the ability to move back to the country, while the snake is unable to make this choice on his own. The right housing makes a happier pet.

Setting Up A Terrarium for Your Reptile

A terrarium is similar to an aquarium except that it isn't full of water and fish. It's a tank made of glass or plastic with a wire mesh lid. The mesh allows air to come in and keeps the reptile from escaping.

Reptiles are cold-blooded, unable to make their own body heat, which is why it is hard for them to move around if the temperature isn't right in their environment. Reptiles lay eggs to hatch their babies. Unlike human babies, which are dependent at birth, reptile babies are born ready to care for themselves.

A successful terrarium is set up with the proper heat source for temperature perfection. A thermostat will ensure the correct temperature at all times. Reptiles need a basking lamp to sunbathe and a light tube for ultraviolet rays.

It sounds expensive and complicated to a beginner, and it very well may be depending on what your idea of expensive is. But once your terrarium is set up, the biggest hurdle is being able to afford the proper food and bedding. The expense of bedding is reduced if you buy two pieces of indoor/outdoor carpeting to allow one to be cleaned while you use the other for your pet.

There are several ways to set up your terrarium, depending on the needs of your reptile. The desert terrarium will need coverage over the inside bottom floor. Most people choose sand or gravel for the desert appeal. Plants will add a hiding place for your reptile and helps increase the natural look and feel of their environment.

You must provide water even in a desert setting for three reasons--- drinking, bathing, and moisture. Even in the desert a certain amount of water is necessary. It should be kept clean and accessible at all times for your pet's comfort and to ward off disease from unclean water. Sometimes a lizard or snake reptile will prefer a tropical forest terrarium setting. You'll have to make sure you regulate the day and night temperatures. Investing in some sort of timer will make this less of a chore and safer for your pet.

The tropical forest is kept damp at all times. Provide a layer of wood chips and maybe some moss to hold the moisture. Keep some sort of trees to allow your reptiles to climb among the branches.

Turtles and some snakes require a habitat that is part land and part water. You must purchase a heater designed to control the water temperature. Adding rocks allows the reptile access out of the water when needed. The rocks should be free of sharp edges to avoid injury to the reptile as it navigates through its home. Place a fluorescent light over the dry areas to allow sunbathing.

The last habitat choice is called a savanna. You can consider it a medium ground between the dry desert setting and the very humid tropical setting. It's also cooler than either and stays only slightly damp. Shady areas should be included for the pet's comfort. Plastic plants discourage the reptile from eating the scenery. Coarse gravel is allowed in the savanna setting.

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Vacation With a Reptile!

Are you fascinated with shows on TV that show wrestling, wrestling between man and alligator? Do snakes repel you, but you still dream about them at night? Do you sometimes feel like a turtle coming out of its shell? If so, you might want to head to the southern part of America and visit the alligators, and all of their reptile relatives. The states of Florida and Louisiana have a spectrum of places to visit reptiles - from the traditional alligator farms that have been around for the last fifty years, to modern wildlife refuges with tour guides that have doctorates in ecology.

If you start in Louisiana, here is a sampling of places where you can see reptiles at their largest, best, and most active. You can start with a boat tour given by Alligator Annie Miller Tours, who has been giving tours of the area by boat since 1979. You can stay near Annie's at an alligator bed and breakfast in Gibson, La at Betty Provost's Wildlife Gardens. Each cabin has an attached deck overlooking the water, and a number of reptiles swim up on the chance that you might throw out some small pieces of alligator chow. These reptiles include small alligators, spiny soft-shell turtles, and red-eared sliders.

The bed and breakfast also has a mile of nature trails that truly have the sound and feel of a real Louisiana swamp. Near Slidell, La. (close to Baton Rouge) is Dr. Wagner's Honey Island Swamp Tour, and is run by the wetlands ecologist. He gives tours through a beautiful cypress swamp, and presents so much fascinating information about the alligators, other reptiles, and waterfowl that live in the area.

If you visit Florida, make sure to stop and see the alligators. Two of the biggest and best alligator attractions in the state are Gatorland, and St. Augustine Alligator Farm. The Farm is really a zoo that was started in the city of St. Augustine in 1893. While there you will hear some amazing sounds, like the bellow of a large male alligator.

It sounds somewhat like an airplane engine, with a lot of vibration that you can actually feel in the air. Bellowing helps the animals locate each other, and brings males and females together during courtship behavior. The farm is also the only park to have all twenty-three species of the crocodile family, some having come from Asia. One of their showcase reptiles was a crocodile brought from New Guinea who grew to nearly eighteen feet long, and weighed seventeen hundred pounds when he died.

As you go near Orlando you cannot miss the signs for Gatorland. This is also a Florida institution, and has been open for fifty-six years. Gatorland has boardwalks crossing over the area where you can watch alligators in their natural habitat. Nearby is the area where you watch large gators propel themselves out of the water at feeding time to retrieve pieces of chicken.

Here you will also see alligator wrestling, which is something that was supposedly started by the Seminole Indians. After selecting and wrestling his opponent, the gator handler asks the visitors which is the most dangerous part of the alligator. It is a split decision between the tail and the teeth, but remember which part of the alligator the wrestler is holding shut when he asks that question!

The End

Some other books by this author include:

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[Short Stuff, the book](#)

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