



Nile monitor lizard

Nile Monitors Lizards in Cape Coral

The City of Cape Coral has a population of Nile monitor lizards, a species endemic to the Nile River Valley and other parts of Africa. Cape Coral's population is believed to have originated as pet releases. These carnivorous lizards pose no threat to residents but they are a threat to native wildlife. Therefore, the City of Cape Coral Environmental Resources Division and its partners at University of Tampa have established a program to trap, euthanize and study this exotic species.

In Africa, Nile monitors prefer to live near water, where they bask, swim, feed, and reproduce. Cape Coral provides suitable habitat for the semi-aquatic nature of this creature due to its large network of freshwater and tidal canals.

The Nile monitor lizard is a concern as an exotic invasive species due to its ability to capture and kill relatively large prey. They are eating native wildlife which may include burrowing owls and other birds, gopher tortoises, young alligators

and small mammals. They are also known to take over burrows, which could further threaten the burrowing owl and gopher tortoise.



Juvenile Nile monitor, captured!

Description

The Nile monitor (*Varanus niloticus*) averages 4-5 feet in overall length, but can grow to exceed 6 feet. An average 5 foot lizard can weigh between 15-20 pounds. Coloration of adult Nile monitors is grey-brown to olive-brown, with light yellow circles or rings that band around the head, body and tail. The underside of the Nile monitor is pale without yellow circles. The coloration in the juveniles is more vivid, with bright yellow circles on an almost black background. A Nile monitor is considered to be juvenile when less than 1 foot in overall length. Generally, Nile monitors are smooth and slender in appearance, almost snake-like, with a pointed snout.



*Mosquito control helicopter spots a Nile monitor
(Photo courtesy of LCMC)*

History

The first interactions between the Environmental Resources Division and Nile monitor lizards arose in the early 1990's when an individual reported sighting one in Four Mile Cove Eco-Preserve. Since then numerous calls have been received from citizens reporting sightings, most of which are in the southwest portion of the City. There are two possible explanations regarding the occurrence of the Nile monitors' first appearance and invasiveness in Cape Coral. The first speculation is that a few individuals unintentionally released their Nile monitor pets in what was at the time a sparsely populated southwest Cape Coral. The other, more probable explanation is that an individual or individuals involved in the pet trade intentionally released adult Nile monitors throughout the southwest area hoping to capture hatchlings for later sale

at pet stores or conventions, as Nile monitors were popular in the exotic pet trade during the era.

Regardless of the introduction circumstances, Nile monitor lizards were able to breed in the wild and increase their numbers to a sustainable population that has a devastating affect on native wildlife.

Habitat

Nile Monitors are semi-aquatic, but are also well suited for terrestrial environments. They do not need a body of water to breed or lay eggs (like true amphibians such as frogs or salamanders), but they are almost always associated with a water source. Throughout the southwest portion of Cape Coral, Nile monitor lizards are frequently seen basking on seawalls or canal banks, passing through yards or empty lots, or swimming in canals. The man-made canal system throughout the city proves to be prime habitat for this easily adaptable creature.



Nile monitor basking

Reproduction

Both sexes of the Nile monitor lizard reach reproductive maturity at about 3 feet in length, or 2 to 3 years in age. Males and females both actively hunt throughout the wet season (June through October) to build up fat stores for breeding and for the inactive period during the dry season (November through May). Breeding occurs from August to November. Eggs are deposited in burrows and have a 6 to 9 month incubation period. Hatchlings arrive in February to April, depending on when eggs were laid.

The Eradication Program

In 2002 the City of Cape Coral's Environmental Resources Division began responding to Nile monitor lizard sightings and deploying traps to capture this exotic invasive species. From 2003 to 2005, Dr. Todd Campbell and his team from the University of Tampa conducted a study to improve trapping techniques and to answer research questions pertaining to the primary diet, habitat and daily activities of Cape Coral's Nile monitor lizards. (Final report at www.chnep.org/Grants/R&R_reports/MonitorLizardEradication_CampbellUnivTampa.pdf) Presently, the City of Cape Coral's Environmental Resources Division traps the Nile monitor as a nuisance species because this prevalent exotic remains a threat to native wildlife. **If one is sighted on your property or in your area please call the City of Cape Coral Environmental Resources Division at (239) 574-0785.**

Cape Coral's Nile Monitor Lizards



(Photo courtesy of Campbell)



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