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X The Galapagos land Iguanas



ÁREA HISTÓRICA
DEL CENTRO DE INFORMACIÓN INTEGRAL

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In appearance and structure the Galapagos Land Iguana differs from its immediate relative, the sea Iguana. It cannot swim its tail is shorter, and not wholly essential to his well being as is the case of the amphibious *Amblyrhynchus*. The head of the land Iguana is longer, wider, with the terminus rather pointed, and the body is heavier. The *Colonophus* (Land Iguana) lives in the soil, which it hollows out with its heavy claws into a deep inclining hole with only one entrance and egress. At the onset of night, and during the cloudy days it remains in its cavern. Approximately at eleven o'clock, when the earth is warm, they slowly creep out as their bodies become animated by the sun's warmth they browse on the cactus pads that have fallen from the bizarre Galapagos cactus 'tree'.

Like the rest of the Galapagos reptilian fauna, the *Colonophusian* land iguana is unique. It is found no other place in the world. And within the volcanic islands themselves, the distribution itself is a zoological puzzle. On the islands of Albermale, James and Seymour, live the yellow-crested species *subcritatus*. In Barrington is the unique *pallidus* species, found on no other island. In Cerro Colorado, Indefatigable Island, the author has found still another species, approximating the Seymour iguanas, save it is brick red and golden and found only on a very restricted part of two islets. How did these Land Iguanas, being unable to swim, become distributed on several islands and then only on small points of the islands? At present, we do not know.

In habits, however, all the Land Iguanas resemble one another. They are *Opuntian* vegetarians. Their diet is

pure cactus pads, which supply them with water as well as food. Clumsily, as if they were digging their burrows, they scrape the obtrusive thorns from the pad, and, with no more ado, set to on the cactus. Their jaws are widely angled and powerful, and they proceed with their meal by clamping down on the pad and pulling off large bites. Werewith their head is thrown back and the cactus worked down the throat. The large reddish tongue moves out of the mouth during the process, apparently crushing the material against the roof of the mouth. Their teeth are not so made as to masticate, and in default of a true stomach, the large intestine must do the extracting of the nutriment.

Unlike the Sea Iguana they can be vicious, they will bite. And if ever one has felt these jaws clamp down on one's hand, one will henceforward give the jaws a wide berth. It will take two powerful hands to force open the jaws, once they have closed with a tenacity akin to the bull-dog. Yet correctly handled they are harmless. Capturing them is rare sport. At Barrington Island, the terrain is generally level and good ground for travel, for travel one must to secure the land Iguana. The Barrington Iguanas have been rather badly persecuted, it being the custom of native fishermen, when passing, to kill a few for food, as they are highly esteemed by them. So the Pallid land iguana is wary of approach. When the day is intensely hot one will be able to see them all over the rocks, lying with eyes half closed, drinking in the sun's rays. They will allow one to approach just so close and then 'there off'. Our native servant Truviño, was an old hand. With nothing on his feet but sandals cut from old rubber tires, he kept after the iguanas, never slacking for a moment. Up the hills, through the bushes, under huge cactus trees, the chase goes on. The Iguana seeks for a hole, a fissure in the rocks, the pursuer seeks to keep so close behind him that he shall not be able to make up his mind to dart into a crevice. Eventually the iguana stops and turns in its tracks, breathless, its sides heaving, with open mouth it defies to be taken. At his moment I saw the actual existence of the phrase «with blood in his eye», the eyes of the pallid iguana, from a light gray, were turned blood red, so red that I expected blood to be ejected like the mannerism of the Arizona spined lizard. Once cornered the Land Iguana is as good as

in the bag. Swiftly I reach behind and get it by the tail the open mouth snaps shut-but on empty air. Truviño runs up with the bag, it is shoved within and our first specimen is secure.

Small, young, land Iguanas are seldom or never seen. We ourselves, during our months at the Galapagos, never observed any others than the matured, older Iguanas. Natives of the Galapagos, in their eternal peregrinations of the volcanic isles have never seen them. It remains, for the moment, one other biological mystery that will only be solved by careful observers. The sea-Iguanas, slightly more gregarious than the land species, have the little iguanas with them all the time. The little fellows, seemingly just hatched from the egg are eminently conspicuous. The placing of the eggs of the Land iguana and the accompanying hatching is unquestionably similar, it therefore is curious that we have never seen them. Of course it is not a mystery, just some as yet unaccountable behaviorism that causes them to remain inconspicuous.

The Iguanas and their distribution, rank as one of the most interesting Galapagos fauna puzzles. Darwin, himself has remarked that nowhere in the entire world, save on the Galapagos would one find so characterized a genus, such as the Iguanas, having its terrestrial and marine species, belonging to so confined a portion of the world.

Like the rest of the zoological puzzles of the Galapagos Islands, a final solving of the origin of the Islands themselves, and the manner in which the original paucity of the fauna arrived, will no doubt, solve the 'case' of the reptiles.