



Western New York Herpetological Society

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Common Name: Savannah Monitor

Latin name: *Varanus exanthematicus*

Native to: Sub-Saharan Africa, from Senegal to Sudan. Found north of the Congo river. Lives in tropical savannahs with seasonal drenching monsoons punctuating extended periods of parched weather.

Size: Typically 2.5 to 4 feet, although rare 5 foot specimens are known.

Life span: 10 to 15 years if given proper care.

General Appearance: This is a stocky monitor with a blocky head, equipped with large, powerful limbs and large talons. The neck and tail are short for a monitor, but still long compared to many lizards. It is colored shades of brown and grey, typically with faint pale spots on its back, darker bands across its tail, and a white underside. Enlarged scales on its neck give it a pebbly appearance. A long, forked, purple tongue is used by the lizard to smell its environment.

Housing requirements:

Enclosure: Adults will need a set-up about the size of a dinner table or large sofa. Plan on 4 feet by 8 feet of floor space. A design that works well uses a galvanized steel stock watering tank as the base with a plywood box of 8 feet long by 4 feet deep by 4 feet tall set on top. The stock tank holds the deep substrate, the box allows room to move around above the ground. Limit ventilation, especially on the hot side of the cage, to prevent turning your enclosure into a dehydration machine. Avoid using wire mesh of any kind, instead use glass or plexiglass to maintain adequate humidity. Young animals can be maintained in aquaria of appropriate sizes with a basking light set overhead and a sheet of plexiglass over the top to limit moisture loss.

Temperature: The cool side of the cage should be between 75 and 80 degrees F, with temperatures increasing to 90° to 100 ° F on the hot end with basking spots as large as the lizard's body that reach 110 ° to 130 ° F. Night time temperatures can fall to normal room temperature.

Heat/Light: A warm basking spot should be provided by radiant light. Racks of flood lamps work well for this, plan on 3 to 4 lamps at 60 to 120 watts each. Adjust the height above the basking spot to reach the ideal temperature. Supplemental heat can be supplied by large, robust heat mats such as "pig blankets." The lizard should be able to rest its entire body on the mat. Ultraviolet light is not necessary.



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Substrate: Dirt provides the best substrate. It needs to be deep enough to allow the lizard to construct tunnels and burrows naturally. This provides not only security, but helps with regulating humidity and temperature. Beware, not all dirt is created equal. Go to a nursery or landscape supply business and choose a dirt that holds a burrow and humidity, drains well, is not too dusty, and does not turn to slime when wet. Fill the monitor's cage to a depth of two feet.

Environment: Be careful not to let your savannah monitor get too dry. Aim for humid-tropical air without making the cage wet. Savannah monitors become inactive in the dry season; a dry cage coupled with readily available food will lead to obesity and health problems. Logs and sticks, particularly hollow logs, provide exercise and entertainment. A large cat litter pan can be used for providing water. Live plants will quickly be destroyed by a curious and active monitor.

Diet: Insects can make up the bulk of the monitor's diet, supplemented by an occasional rodent. Lightly dust insects with a reptile vitamin and mineral powder. Large cockroaches, such as Madagascar hissing roaches, are especially relished. If you can collect snails and earthworms from pesticide free areas, add these to your lizard's diet to round it out. A diet based largely on rodents may also be used, but it is unknown if this will cause health problems in the long term (wild savannah monitors eat almost entirely invertebrates). Feed whole food items whenever possible, avoid canned foods, cuts of meat, and cat or dog foods. Multiple small food items are preferable to one large meal. Feed daily. Savannah monitors are prone to obesity, feed juveniles as much as they will eat but adjust the diet of adults as needed. Fasts, possibly lasting several months, may be useful for controlling weight.

Maintenance: Clean up feces and urates as soon as you notice them, inspect the cage at least once daily for cleanliness. Replace the water when it becomes soiled or dirty and scrub out the dish. The top substrate can dry out, but make sure it remains moist (not wet) underneath. Add a few buckets of water to the cage as necessary to keep the substrate slightly damp.

Other references or recommended reading:

(Many of the older books are best avoided due to out of date information or simply due to inaccuracy.)

Bennett, Daniel and Thakoordyal, Ravi. The Savannah Monitor Lizard. Glossop, England: Viper Press 2003.

Bartlett, R. D and Bartlett, Patricia. Monitors, Tegus, and Related Lizards. Hong Kong: Barron's 1996.

Bennett, Daniel. Monitor Lizards: Natural History, Biology & Husbandry. Frankfurt: Edition Chimaira 1998.

King, Dennis and Green, Brian. Goanna: The Biology of the Varanid Lizards. Kensington NSW Australia: New South Wales University Press 1993.

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This document is for guidance only and should not be used as the sole source of information. New information is being developed daily. It is recommend that a concerted effort be made to maintain up-to-date knowledge of the animals of interest.