

Gila Monster

BY TERRY B. JOHNSON • ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZDINAK

Scientific Name: *Heloderma suspectum*. From the Greek *helos*, meaning nail or stud, and *derma*, meaning the skin; and the Latin *suspectus*, meaning distrusted or suspicious.

Description: Stout-bodied, 18–24 inches long and weighing up to 2 pounds. Massively jawed, with broad head, beady eyes, and short muscular legs with big feet and strongly clawed, large toes. The black and orange/pink/yellowish/whitish broken blotches, bars, and spots on the body and bands on the tail are distinctive, as is the thick, beady skin. Although the body pattern is variable, the snout and jaws are always black.

Distribution: Found throughout the Gila River Basin of central Arizona, north to southern Utah, Nevada, and eastern California, and south through extreme southwestern New Mexico and southern Arizona into northwestern Mexico.

Habitat: A desert dweller, occurring from near sea level to 3500–4000 feet elevations in Sonoran, Chihuahuan, and (less so) Mohave and Great Basin desert-scrub, edging into desert grasslands (occasionally woodlands) at higher elevations and into thornscrub in southerly portions of the range. More common in moister, rockier Sonoran desert-scrub (saguaro-paloverde studded foothills and washes) than in drier, finely-soiled creosotebush-bursage communities.

Biology: Often thought of as rare, but more accurately described as infrequently seen and less common than smaller diurnal lizards that most people see. This is a sedentary beast, spending as much as 98 percent of its time

below ground in burrow complexes that it digs or borrows and enhances. Surface activity peaks occur in late spring, late summer, and on cloudy, humid monsoon evenings, nights, and mornings. Like many desert animals, Gila monsters avoid surface activity during the hottest hours of summer, and often are seen at night, but they are not strictly nocturnal. At low elevations on sunny winter days, they often bask at or near the entrance to their winter dens.

Bird and reptile eggs, lizards, and newborn and nestling birds, rodents,



jackrabbits, and cottontails are dietary mainstays. Adult Gila monsters can consume up to 35 percent of their body weight in food, or water; youngsters can beat that by another 15 percent. A Gila monster may feed only a few times a year, but one good stuffing can (and sometimes must!) last an entire year.

Gila monsters mate in May, but the 3–12 eggs laid in mid-July to mid-August will not hatch until the following April–June. Hatching time largely depends on soil temperature, which varies with latitude and elevation. The eggs are

shiny and moist when laid, but quickly dry and become leathery—but soft.

One of only two venomous reptiles in the world (the other is the Mexican beaded lizard), the Gila monster is not much of a threat except to its natural prey. Any human bitten by a Gila monster is almost certain to have been provoking and handling the lizard. More often than not, the human “victim” is alcohol impaired. Nevertheless, the venom of this creature is potent, has contributed to the death of a few humans over the decades, and produces severe pain that any rational person would just as soon forego.

Status: A Species of Special Concern in Arizona, but not federally listed or a candidate for federal listing as threatened or endangered. The Arizona population’s statewide and local trends are unknown, but based on anecdotal records the breadth of distribution seems largely much as it was 30 years ago. The exception would be urban areas near Phoenix and Tucson, where roads and development have taken their toll. Gila monsters may not be taken from the wild in Arizona without a special (scientific collecting) permit from the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

Management Needs: We can meet the Gila monster’s needs by continuing the restriction on collection and by protecting the prey on which it feeds and the habitats in which it occurs. Denning sites and movement corridors are important habitat components. Aside from these actions, the best thing humans can do for this species is leave it alone. ♣

Terry B. Johnson serves as chief of the department’s Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program.