



\*Aaron Bourque

## Nile and Ornate Monitors (*Varanus niloticus*) and (*Varanus ornatus*)

### Versatility from the Nile

Nile and Ornate monitors are large monitor species that are highly versatile animals. As with most monitor species, they use their strong claws, limbs, and tails for digging, swimming, and climbing well. The Nile monitor is a large, stocky monitor species with powerful claws, limbs, and tail, as well as a well-developed olfactory system (forked tongue). They can range in color from grayish, to blackish to grayish green or yellowish green with numerous rows of lighter colored to yellowish dorsal ocelli and rosettes grading into banding on the tail. Nile/Ornate Monitors and some other large monitor species are a controlled, regulated, or prohibited species in some states. Always check any applicable federal, state, and local laws and ordinances that may pertain to the specific possession of this species.

### Taxonomy

**Life:** All living, physical, and animate entities

**Domain:** Eukaryota

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Phylum/Sub Phylum:** Chordata/Vertebrata

**Class:** Reptilia

**Order:** Squamata

**Suborder:** Lacertilia

**Infraorder:** Platynota

**Family:** Varanidae

**Genus:** Varanus

**Subgenus:** Polydaedalus

**Species:** *Varanus niloticus*\* and *Varanus ornatus*\*

\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

### Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, Nile and Ornate monitors can attain longevity of 15 to 25 years or more.

### Distribution and Habitat

Nile and Ornate monitors are found in a wide range of habitats throughout much of sub Saharan Africa including the savannahs, grasslands, semi-deserts, wetlands, river banks, and near human habitations within this range.

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### **Conservation Status**

Not Evaluated for the IUCN Red List (NE) or otherwise Data Deficient (DD).

### **Experience Level Required**

Advanced.

### **Size**

Nile and ornate monitors begin and range in size from about 7 to 12 inches as hatchlings, but will quickly grow. As adults, these monitors reach and average between 4 ½ to 6 ½ feet, or about 54 to 78 inches as adults. **Consider the potential size and space requirements of a Nile or Ornate Monitor prior to obtaining one.**

### **Housing and Enclosure**

Housing must also be sealed and escape proof. Hatchling Nile and ornate monitors can be started out in a 10 to 20 gallon long enclosure, but will soon require larger accommodations. Enclosure size should be increased accordingly depending on the animal's size. If standard glass terrariums with screen tops are used at any point, ensure that adequate humidity and temperatures are maintained using additional steps to retain it. Adult Nile and ornate monitors will require a minimum of a six to eight foot by three foot terrarium or enclosure or larger. Very large, custom designed pens or enclosures are perhaps the most suitable housing for most mid to large sized monitors. As with other monitors, Nile and ornate monitors also powerful diggers, and should also be provided with substrates that enable burrowing and retain humidity well such as chemical and pesticide free potting soil, cypress mulch, orchid bark substrates. Be sure to provide at least 18 to 24 inches of substrate. Monitors in general are very intelligent, alert and perceptive animals, and will require sufficient levels of safety, security, and stimulation and enrichment in order to do well in captivity. Provide a hide box and artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, slabs, or logs for ample basking and hiding opportunities. A large enough water bowl or dish that they can readily enter and exit from that can work with one's enclosure setup and arrangement is also strongly recommended for maintaining adequate longer term hydration, humidity, and quality of life for these monitors. Water should be changed or filtered regularly at a minimum of every other day to maintain cleanliness and sanitary conditions. Nile and ornate monitors are primarily a terrestrial species, but will climb readily if given the opportunity.

### **Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity**

For basking, create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure with an appropriate sized under tank heating pad, ceramic, or radiant heat emitter. In general, the preferred ambient temperatures within the enclosure should be within the mid 70's to 80's to even 90's. Basking and warm side temperatures can be allowed to reach up to 120 to 150 degrees F on the warm, basking side. Nile and Ornate monitors also require overhead UVA, UVB incandescent and fluorescent lighting using the appropriate wattage bulbs or other heating elements. Spot clean the enclosure for urates, feces, or uneaten food at least twice per week. Be sure to periodically replace the substrate, clean, and disinfect the enclosure and its furnishings at minimum every 2 to 3 months. More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

### **Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition**

***Insectivorous to Carnivorous;*** In the wild, Nile and ornate monitors are primarily carnivorous to insectivorous, and will feed on a wide variety of food including insects and other invertebrates, crustaceans, mollusks, and other invertebrates, as well as many small vertebrates including small

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mammals, birds, bird and reptile eggs, amphibians, and other smaller reptiles. They will also eat carrion, or dead and decaying plant and animal matter as well.

In captivity, variety is essential to a proper and adequate monitor diet. Nile and ornate monitors can be fed a variety of feeder insects of appropriate size including crickets, roaches, mealworms, superworms, and waxworms supplemented with vitamin D3 and calcium. Frozen-thawed rodents of appropriate size and raw food items such as turkey, beef, or eggs can also be offered, but sparingly, if at all, as these food items are high in fat and protein for monitors. It is also important to remember not to overfeed any monitors, as they can become very prone to obesity. Feeding schedules can depend on the age, size, and overall health of your monitor, but typically, an appropriate feeding regime for young and hatchling monitors should be two to three times weekly. Most monitors are very alert, intelligent and personable species that can become food aggressive when in the presence of food, and therefore require additional care when handling. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

### **Handling**

**Nile monitors are by no means a beginner's pet, and have long held a reputation for being a species requiring more experienced care and handling.** When they are agitated, a Nile monitor may tail whip, inflate their throats by hissing to appear larger and more intimidating, and/or attempt to scratch or bite if handled or restrained incorrectly. Nevertheless, it is possible to end up with an adult Nile that is accustomed to people and being handled, but this takes considerable time, patience, and effort on the keeper's part in order to achieve. Nile, and other monitors in general, are animals that require considerable amounts of regular time, patience, and commitment in order to become docile, handleable adult animals. Many different techniques and mindsets are out there with regards to handling and working with these reptiles, which can certainly go into far greater depth than the scope of this basic care sheet. Many believe a more hands off approach is more successful overall, and allowing the animal to gradually and routinely become accustomed to their keeper's presence, to being touched, and handled. Others may choose to practice a more direct, routine handling approach, which may or may not be effective, but often unfortunately causes greater stress and/or injury to the keeper and the animal. Once in the hand, hatchling monitors can be handled with both hands cupped with care not to drop or restrain them tightly. An adult monitor (as well as other species of large lizards) should always receive adequate bodily support from underneath using the hand, and arm for support. Additional restraint can be made by tucking or pinning the animal's tail or hind quarters between the arm and body as well. Each animal is an individual, and these techniques may not be effective for all monitors, but are nonetheless the most commonly utilized. Monitors in general certainly are not for everyone, but with the right techniques and husbandry, can make for very intelligent and personable pets.

**\*\*Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens\*\***

### **Contact**

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this animal, group of animals, or this care sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at [info@madisonherps.org](mailto:info@madisonherps.org)

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