



*Zac Herr/ZTH Photography

Savannah Monitor (*Varanus exanthematicus*)

Widespread Spunk of the Savannah

The Savannah monitor is a medium to large stocky and sturdily built monitor species that is also sometimes known by the common name of Bosc's monitor in Europe after the French scientist, Louis Bosc that first described this species. As with most monitor species, savannah monitors are highly versatile animals that use their strong claws, limbs, and tails for digging, swimming, and climbing. They are a medium to large sized primarily terrestrial (or ground dwelling) monitor with a large, stocky head, limbs, and tail. This species can be grayish, tan, to brown in ground color with numerous white spots and ocelli along their dorsal surface and darker bands on the tail. Savannah monitors are a popular pet lizard species to maintain, and are perhaps the most widely sold and available monitor species. However, they are a species that require the proper research, care, and husbandry, as well as patience in order to become personable and enjoyable pets.

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

Species: *Varanus exanthematicus**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

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

Distribution and Habitat

Savannah monitors are a widespread species found throughout most of sub Saharan Africa in scrubland, savannahs, semi-desert, rocky areas, and grasslands within this range. They may specifically be found from Senegal and Ghana to Sudan in the east, and south to the Congo River region of Africa.

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Conservation Status

IUCN Least Concern (LC).

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Savannah, or Bosc's monitors range from about 4 to 6 inches as hatchlings, but will quickly grow. As adults, savannah monitors will average between about 3 ½ to 4 feet, or 42 to 48 inches as adults. **Consider the potential size and space requirements of a Savannah Monitor prior to obtaining one.**

Housing and Enclosure

Housing must also be sealed and escape proof. Hatchling savannah 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 savannah monitors will require a minimum of a six foot by three foot terrarium or enclosure. Very large, custom designed pens or enclosures are perhaps the most suitable housing for most mid to large sized monitors. As with other monitors, savannah 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. Savannah 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 or 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. Savannah 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

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Insectivorous to Carnivorous; In the wild, savannah 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 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. Savannah 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

Savannah monitors, 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

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