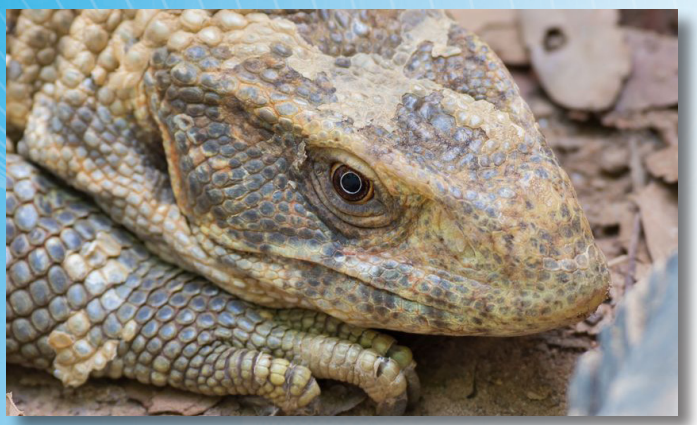
Care Cards

Savannah Monitors



The savannah monitor, *Varanus exaruthematicus*, is the most commonly owned member of the monitor family. Their calm disposition and ease of maintenance are just a few of the reasons for their popularity. Savannah monitors are the smallest of the African monitors, with adults reaching an average length of three to four feet. Savannah monitors are short, squatty lizards with a distinct circular pattern of colored scales along their body. They prefer a hot, dry climate similar to their native location in Africa. Heat, food, and security are the three most important aspects of monitor husbandry.

The rule of thumb for housing any adult monitor is an enclosure that is three times the total length of the animal and at least half of its total length for the width of the enclosure. A 50-gallon aquarium will be adequate for housing a juvenile Savannah monitor. Because of their overall size as adults, the cage materials need to be durable enough to withstand digging and remodeling. Any screening must be able to withstand lots of abuse. All cage materials must be nonabrasive and easy to clean.

Savannah monitors like to burrow, climb and explore all areas of their enclosure. Housing requirements vary based on the age of the monitor. For new hatchlings, a medium-sized aquarium, 20-30 gallons, will suffice. The substrate should consist of about 5 inches of sphagnum moss or crushed walnut. A full spectrum light for heat and ultraviolet radiation should be used. A pile of small rocks or wood for climbing and a water bowl will be plenty of cage furniture

Adult monitors should have a minimum enclosure space of 4 feet by 8 feet. Monitors are terrestrial animals and therefore height is minimally important when compared to floor space. Adults will require twice the depth of substrate item, almost 12 inches of mulch or decomposed granite. Medium-sized trashcans work well for hiding places. Large branches or driftwood can be used for basking sites.

The enclosure should be set up with a hot spot of near 100 degrees Fahrenheit for basking. A thermal gradient should be provided for proper thermoregulation during the day. Full spectrum ultraviolet lighting is necessary for Savannah monitors, although direct, unfiltered sunlight is preferred. Savannah monitors are diurnal animals; therefore, when housed indoors their room needs to be dark once their cage lights go off. This is a strong point for outdoor housing of this reptile. Monitors prefer a nighttime temperature drop. Contrary to a common belief, Savannah monitors do not appreciate constant heat and/or high temperatures.

Juvenile and hatchling monitors should be kept at normal environmental temperature and fed all year round. Adult monitors over 15 months of age should be provided with a cooling down period of approximately 3 months, starting in November. They still should be fed at least twice a week and offered water more frequently. Around March the temperature should gradually increase until it returns to normal levels. At this time the monitors will begin feeding more voraciously.

In the past, Savannah monitors have been fed a diet of mice or rats, domestic pet food, or commercially prepared canned food. Unfortunately, the protein-rich diets can cause long-term health problems. Today, insect-based protein provides a longer-term quality of health. Diets containing crickets, mealworms, waxworms, ground turkey and hard-boiled eggs are suggested for Savannah monitors. The biggest problem with monitor diets is that they will eat anything. Many owners will unknowingly over-feed their monitors.

This combined with inadequate cage space or inadequate activity will lead to an obese reptile. Obesity will lead to a fatty liver and ultimately the monitor's death. Additionally, the feeding of several small meals over a seven-day period is preferred over the feeding of one large meal each week.

The exception to this feeding program occurs when an owner "power feeds" their female monitors prior to breeding. This process will ensure the females have adequate fat reserves for proper egg production.

Savannah monitors can be difficult to sex. Sexually mature males are slightly larger than females and have a noticeable hemipene bulge at the base of their tail. Immature female monitors have a pair of scent glands that mimic the hemipenes of the males. Probing is usually necessary to properly determine the sex of most monitors.

Savannah monitors will readily breed following a cooling down period of approximately three months. Following the warming phase and heavy feeding, the monitors will begin breeding from August to September. It is believed that female monitors produce pheromones during estrus to attract males for breeding. Following breeding the females should be separated and allowed to nest. Eggs are usually laid in October. Although hide boxes should be provided, most females will scatter their eggs along the cage floor. The eggs should be incubated between 83 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit. Hatching will usually occur 140 to 165 days later.

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