

SPECIES PROFILE

Species Profile: The Knight Anole, *Anolis equestris*, in Southern Florida

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The Knight Anole, *Anolis equestris*, is a most fascinating lizard. Endemic to Cuba, where it is widely distributed, the species has been in Florida for half a century. There, it has become an ubiquitous member of southern Florida's exotic herpetofaunal community. Ecologically, this species stands out as a very un-anole-like anole. It is very large, the largest species in the genus, reaching nearly 60 cm in total length. It is omnivorous. It sits and waits for prey or actively forages for invertebrates, small vertebrates, and the tender foliage and fruits of various plants. The texture of its skin is far more similar to a chameleon-like suede

than the typical dry and sandy feel of most other anoles. Likewise, its eyes, casqued head, and careful movements are more like those of the true chameleons (*Chameleo* spp.) or its ancient Cuban relatives (anoles formerly placed in the genus *Chameleolis*) than those of the more evolutionarily derived anoles with which it shares its home in southern Florida. These lizards' odd outlines, exacerbated by the prominent head casques, the broken and variable color patterns dominated by greens of various hues, and their often deliberate style of movement causes them to be easily overlooked by friends and foes alike.



A rather odd profile, exacerbated by a prominent head casque, plus the broken and variable color patterns dominated by greens of various hues render these lizards very cryptic despite their large size. *Photograph by Joe Burgess.*



These large anoles are most frequently seen when they bask on trunks of trees. *Photograph by Joe Burgess.*

Because of its role as a large, successful predator and the fact that it utilizes arboreal habitats that overlap with those used by the anoles it often eats, Knight Anoles are likely to be a major force in shaping the anoline assemblage of southern Florida, much of which consists of introduced species, mostly from Caribbean islands. Orlando Garrido, an eminent Cuban herpetologist, once predicted, for example, that Cuban Green Anoles (*Anolis porcatius*) would never successfully colonize southern Florida, mainly because Knight Anoles, which routinely eat their smaller relatives, were so abundant. That the Cuban Green Anoles have apparently succeeded attests more to the abundance of cover in the dense groves of ornamental plants that characterize most urban and suburban communities in southern Florida than to any deficiency of Knight Anoles as predators.

From the standpoint of a colonizing species, much remains to be studied, but Knight Anoles appear to follow closely the pattern seen in Florida's Green Iguanas and many other species of introduced amphibians and reptiles: they are abundant human commensals with enviable reproductive potential and which are eminently capable of taking full advantage of the artificially lush habitats of southern and especially coastal Florida.

References

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These lizards are striking and cryptic at the same time. *Photograph by Walter E. Meshaka, Jr.*