HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Two Early Reports of Intentionally Released Reptiles

Notes on *Heloderma suspectum* and *Iguana tuberculata*[1]

Pennoyer F. English

On April 2, 1923, the writer received a poisonous lizard, *Heloderrna suspectum*, from Wheelock, Robertson County, Texas. This village lies in the southeast part of the county on no highway and about twelve miles from the nearest railroad. This animal had been killed by a farmhand as it was crawling about on his land, and was brought by a student to the department of biology of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas. The finding of this reptile in Robertson County so far from its native home is indeed interesting. Ditmars ["Reptiles of the World," 1922], Gadow ["Amphibia and Reptilia," Cambridge Natural History, Volume 8], Hegner ["College Zoology," revised edition, 1926], Hornaday ["The American Natural History," 1904] and Pratt ["Manual of the Vertebrates of the United States," 1923], limit the distribution of these animals to Arizona, New Mexico and northern Mexico. Only one other occurrence of the Gila Monster in Texas is recorded in the literature available to the writer. Cope ["The Crocodilians, Lizards and Snakes of North America," Report U.S. National Museum, 1898] lists a specimen taken at Fort McDowell, Texas. This single find was referred to by Strecker ["Reptiles adn Amphibians of Texas," 1915] who comments somewhat skeptically on the report and states that he made careful search in favorable localities for these reptiles, but failed to find them in Texas. Any attempt to explain how this lizard found its way to Wheelock, some four or five hundred miles from its native haunts, would be mere guesswork.

The writer has lately received from Mr. L. T. Hunter, county agent, Childress County, Texas, another most interesting find — the common Iguana, *Iguana tuberculata*. This reptile was killed on a roadside near Childress and was sent to the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas on December 20, 1926. Childress County lies close to the eastern border of the Panhandle of Texas, touching the southwest corner of Oklahoma. This find is even more remarkable than the former, since the iguana was much farther from its native home — tropical America. The specimen measures three feet, nine and one half inches in length and apparently is only partly grown. Gadow states that *Iguana tuberculata* attains a length of five or six feet. Ditmars, Gadow, Hegner and Hornaday give the distribution as Central and South America and the West Indies, where it lives in trees. How such a reptile could find its way from its tropical and arboreal habitat in the jungles to the almost treeless plains of Childress, Texas, is an interesting speculation.

RUSTY DODSON

Gila Monsters (*Heloderma suspectum*) showing up far from their original range in the 1920s was attributed to intentional transport and release by humans.

[1] Originally published in *Science*, New Series, Vol. 66, No. 1697, 8 July 1927, p. 37.

Heloderma Suspectum, Automobile Tourists and Animal Distribution[2]

Charles T. Vorhies

In a note in SCIENCE, Mr. P. F. English ["Notes on *Heloderma suspectum* and *Iguana tuberculata*," SCIENCE, Vol. LXVI, No. 1697, p. 37] records two instances of the finding of large lizards at considerable distances from their known native habitats. One of these occurrences is that of *Heloderma suspectum*, the Gila monster, concerning which the author remarks that "any attempt to explain how this lizard found its way to Wheelock [Texas], some four or five hundred miles from its native haunts, would be mere guesswork." Concerning the other, an *Iguana tuberculata* from Central America taken in Texas, admittedly a still more difficult occurrence to explain, he says, "How such a reptile could find its way from its tropical and arboreal habitat in the jungles to the almost treeless plains of Childress, Texas, is an interesting speculation."

The present writer heartily agrees to the interesting character of the speculation induced, but believes that an explanation for the first, if not the second instance, may be offered which will be much better than "mere guesswork." Incidentally a new, or if not new, little considered, factor in animal distribution may be given point.

[2] Originally published in *Science*, New Series, Vol. 68, No. 1756, 24 August 1928, pp. 182–183.

JAMES HODGINS

Although Green Iguanas (Iguana iguana) have been widely introduced in recent years, their appearance in Texas in the 1920s was difficult to explain.

During the course of a dozen years in my present location I have received from interested and curious persons many specimens of the peculiar or unique animals of the southwest; and there have passed through my hands, mainly from these sources, probably nearly one hundred Gila monsters. During that period of time, though my work has taken me afield frequently, I have in person come across barely a half dozen of these conspicuous and not very swift lizards. This indicates, first, the extent to which people gather up specimens of animal life that excite their curiosity, and transport them in a spirit of helpfulness, curiosity or cupidity. (I have been asked to pay ten dollars for a very ordinary Gila monster, and been solemnly assured that they were worth one hundred dollars.) Secondly, the modern auto tourist is likely to tire of and release his "specimen" unless he can dispose of it to advantage. I have been the recipient of two Helodermas, each of which had been carried for some time by auto touring parties, and for distances of not less than two hundred miles. Further, such a specimen is frequently carried tethered somewhere on the outside of the car by an insecure noose about its neck or leg. Tourists in this region often express a desire to take a "Gila" "back home," anywhere from five hundred to fifteen hundred miles from here — and no doubt many of them attempt to do so. A certain dealer in live animals sells surprising numbers of them for this very purpose.

The finding of the specimen in Texas is no surprise to me. It seems much more certain than "guess work" to assume that such an animal, or any interesting animal of readily transportable size, found even hundreds of miles from its native home, has been carried most of the distance by rail or auto, especially the latter. The *Heloderma* mentioned might easily have wandered from the nearest main highway, even though the distance be considerable, for this lizard is tenacious of life, and that locality would not, I believe, be a particularly unfavorable environment for it.

The principles involved in the foregoing statements have many and various illustrations, as every inspector at a horticultural inspection station on a main auto highway in the southwest can testify. The auto tourist carries everything interesting from where he finds it to some other place; anything from a "horned toad" to an entire cotton plant, leaves, bolls, boll weevils and all. The *Iguana tuberculata* record is, to be sure, somewhat less likely to be the result of transfer by auto, but not unlikely to have come up by train. I have now a live *Iguana* sp. which recently arrived in Tucson in a bunch of bananas by rail from the west coast of Mexico. A few years ago I was the recipient of a live five and one-half foot *Boa imperator*, picked up by an autoist just beyond the border town of Nogales, Sonora. This, I should judge, came up from Central America nearly to the United States by train, thence it certainly came another seventy miles by auto. Mr. Roy McCain, of Tucson, relates that, while hunting a few miles northwest of Pantana, a station about thirty miles east of Tucson, in the foothills of the Rincon Mountains, he met a large lizard which he killed with a stick. This measured three feet in length and must have been an *Iguana* sp., though unfortunately it was not saved. This was in October, 1927.

I have now alive in my laboratory an opossum, carried into this new (and probably unfavorable) environment from Arkansas. Its captor chanced to tire of it just at this point, but might equally well have elected to turn it loose in some favorable looking spot in the state — or in California. It is known that opossums have previously been released in this region. Arizona (likewise California) has a cordon of horticultural inspectors stationed at strategic points for intercepting and inspecting autos coming into the state. The findings of these inspectors, plus the other instances cited, have served to emphasize for us here the possibilities of auto traffic as a factor in animal distribution in a manner which, perhaps, has not come forcibly to the attention of biologists in many other states. The cotton plant incident is a fact from the experiences of the inspectors.

Editor's Remarks

Invasive species are a major problem that conservation biologists face on a regular basis. In recent years, we have been seeing more and more reports of reptiles and amphibians appearing far from their natural ranges. Traditionally, introduced species were thought to arrive in "foreign" destinations mostly by accident. A recent note (2006. *Iguana* 13:272–277) described an attempt to prevent such arrivals on Guana Island in the British Virgin Islands. Recent research, however, has shown that a large number of these invasives are intentionally released by pet owners and others. The two brief reports that follow clearly show that this is not a new phenomenon: Some eighty years ago, large lizards and snakes were being noted hundreds of miles from their native ranges. P.F. English found this confusing, but C.T. Vorhies identified people as the primary vector long before others became aware of the issue. These fascinating early notes are a strong reminder to never release a captive animal — we now unerstand the potentially disastrous consequences of such irresponsible behavior.

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