

An Annotated Bibliography of the Captive Husbandry, Breeding, Behavior, Veterinary Management and Trade of Tree Monitor Lizards (*Varanus prasinus* Complex)

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Abstract – Members of the *Varanus prasinus* complex, commonly referred to as tree monitors, have been maintained in captivity since the 1960s. To date, seven of the nine recognized species comprising this group have been kept and reproduced in captivity. This bibliography provides an extensive compilation of published literature referencing this group in captivity, which should prove useful to zoos and private keepers currently keeping or looking to add representatives of this group to their collections, as well as researchers, veterinary personnel, and wildlife officials monitoring their trade and exploitation.

Introduction

There are currently nine recognized species of varanid lizard belonging to the *Varanus prasinus* species complex (Ziegler *et al.*, 2007), although the validity of one taxon, *V. telenesetes*, has recently been called into question (Koch *et al.*, 2014). Commonly referred to as tree monitors, representatives of this group have been known to science since the 19th century, with *V. prasinus* described by Schlegel in 1839, *V. beccarii* described by Doria in 1874 and *V. kordensis* by Meyer in 1874. Yet, unlike several other varanid species such as *V. niloticus*, *V. albigularis*, *V. griseus* and *V. salvator* which were displayed in zoos and kept in private collections throughout the 19th century (e.g., Anonymous, 1883), it wasn't until the 1960s that living specimens of this group were first maintained in captivity. This absence of *V. prasinus* complex animals from living collections

was most likely due to a combination of factors, including their remote geographical origins within Indo-Australia, their difficulty to locate and collect in the wild, and the lack of a trade network or supply chain of live reptiles from this region at the time. Additionally, given their frailty and susceptibility to dehydration (Boyer & Boyer, 1997; Card, 1995; Hartdegen, 1997; Kirschner *et al.*, 1996; Salisbury, 2010), it is doubtful that living representatives would have survived the long oceanic transport from their home range to Europe or North America during the 19th and first half of the 20th century.

The earliest known representative to be kept in captivity was *V. prasinus*, with a single specimen acquired by German herpetologist Robert Mertens in 1960 (Mertens, 1971) that survived for 10 years

(Mertens, 1970). Since then and as additional species belonging to the complex were discovered and described (e.g., Böhme & Jacobs, 2001; Eidenmüller & Wicker, 2005; Jacobs, 2003), a total of seven species have been maintained in zoos and private collections: *V. beccarii*, *V. boehmei*, *V. keithhornei*, *V. kordensis*, *V. macraei*, *V. prasinus* and *V. reisingeri*. All seven of these taxa have successfully been reproduced in captivity, with some species, particularly *V. prasinus* bred to multiple generations (e.g., Baldwin, 2006; Lemm, 2014; Mendyk, 2012). Although the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) reported the export of several *V. bogerti* from Indonesia during the mid-1990s (CITES, 2015), such claims are highly dubious. Instead, it is likely that these individuals were either misidentified or intentionally mislabeled by traders to thwart or circumvent export restrictions and quotas for similar species within the *V. prasinus* complex, especially considering that *V. bogerti* is not indigenous to Indonesia, and its native Papua New Guinea prohibits the export of wildlife.

Published bibliographies on a particular subject or taxonomic group can be an invaluable resource to keepers and institutions seeking to maintain and reproduce reptiles in captivity. Unfamiliarity with literature on the biology, husbandry and veterinary management of a particular species or taxonomic group can prevent keepers from providing optimal conditions needed for their captives to thrive or inhibit the provision of key parameters needed for successful reproduction to occur. A general unfamiliarity with current and historical literature on the biology, keeping and breeding of varanid lizards has been observed among some keepers, including zoos, and may be contributing to some of the issues and challenges experienced with their care and breeding (Mendyk, 2015; Mendyk *et al.*, in press). Several published bibliographies have been compiled for varanid lizards (Bayless, 1996; Kenyon, 1995; Kronen, 1983); however, these accounts, now around two or more decades old, are grossly outdated and require extensive updating.

To date, no such compilation of literature has been presented for the *V. prasinus* complex, a particularly difficult group of varanids to maintain and breed in captivity (e.g., Aucone *et al.*, 2007; Mendyk, 2006). The following bibliography with accompanying annotations provides a compilation of references, organized by species, which pertain to the captive husbandry, breeding, behavior, veterinary management and trade of the *V. prasinus* complex, with the hopes of familiarizing keepers, researchers, veterinarians,

wildlife officials and general enthusiasts with the information presently available on this unique group of varanids. It should be noted that husbandry, breeding and veterinary information presented for one species may be applicable to other species within the complex given their remarkable similarities in size, morphology, ecology and captive requirements.

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Varanus keithhornei

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Varanus kordensis

Since *V. kordensis* was formerly recognized as a subspecies of *V. prasinus* and frequently synonymized with the latter by keepers, it is possible that older published accounts (e.g., those preceding Jacobs' [2002] elevation of the taxon to specific rank) reporting on *V. prasinus* may actually reference *V. kordensis*, or both *V. prasinus* and *V. kordensis*. The lack of detailed physical descriptions accompanying many of these reports (i.e., differentiating between dorsal ocelli as in *V. kordensis* or transverse dorsal cross bands in *V. prasinus*) renders distinguishing which of the two species are being referenced nearly impossible. Nevertheless, due to their similarities in size, morphology, behavior and husbandry requirements, information presented for one species should in most cases be considered applicable to the other.

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- Eidenmüller, B. 2007. Monitor Lizards: Natural History, Captive Care & Breeding. Edition Chimaira, Frankfurt am Main, 176 pp. [brief discussion of husbandry and reproduction]
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Varanus prasinus

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Varanus reisingeri

- Eidenmüller, B. 2009. Warane: Lebensweise, Pflege, Zucht. Herpeton Verlag, Offenbach. 207 pp. [brief discussion of husbandry and breeding information]
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