

## **Jurassic Park? No, Winding Cypress.**

We've seen lots of wildlife here in Winding Cypress, but perhaps none quite so prehistoric-looking as those funny reptiles running along Henderson Creek as you enter Winding

Cypress. In fact, Rick Timko of Iguana Removal and Control Services of Naples has trapped sixteen iguanas in Winding Cypress alone! Just ask WC resident Len Boscia. "I contacted a trapper because there were a number of large iguanas—greater than four feet in length—coming into the garden and eating the blossoms and leaves of my favorite hibiscus and bougainvillea shrubs. The heaviest iguanas would



actually climb onto a branch so that the limb would fold down, so it could reach more of the plant to eat."

Florida is home to several non-native iguana species, including the green, the black spiny tail, and the Mexican spiny tail iguanas. Running on all four legs, these dinosaur doppelgangers are quick—in fact, some, like the black iguana, can zip along at speeds of up to twenty-one miles per hour!

So where will you find these pesky reptiles? Look for them on the ground, in shrubs, or in trees. They are quick climbers and excellent swimmers, tolerating both salt and freshwater, and can submerge themselves for up to four hours at a time. They've also been known to dig burrows that erode and collapse sidewalks, foundations, seawalls, berms, and canal banks.

These beasts are not native to Florida and are considered an invasive species due to their impacts to native wildlife. Like all nonnative reptile species, iguanas are not protected in Florida except by anti-cruelty law and can be humanely killed on private property with landowner permission. This species can be captured and humanely killed year-round and without a permit or hunting license on [32 public lands](#) in south Florida.

## **Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder**

Of the three, green iguanas are the largest invasive species in Florida. They are typically green lizards, though they can sometimes be brown or almost black in color. Some adults can take on an orange or pink coloration during certain times of the year. Hatchling and young green iguanas usually have bright green coloration and can live up to 10 years in the wild and 19 years in captivity. They are easily identifiable by their row of spikes down the center of the neck, back, and upper portion of the tail, as well as dark black rings on the tail.

Mature male green iguanas can exceed five feet in length, weighing in at up to 17 pounds. They typically develop heavy jowls and a throat fan (or dewlap) that are much larger than

those of female iguanas. Larger throat fans can help regulate body temperature, as well as make male iguanas appear bigger, repel rivals, warn predators, and make them more attractive to females.

Female green iguanas can also reach five feet in length but usually do not exceed seven pounds. They typically reach reproductive maturity at two to four years of age, mating in October through November close to home. They'll create nests along riverbanks, beaches, and other sandy areas, digging egg chambers that may contain nearly 80 feet of interconnected tunnels and multiple entrances. Once complete, the little ladies will lay clutches of anywhere from 14-76 eggs.



## Dining in or out?

Green iguanas feed on a wide variety of vegetation, including shoots, leaves, blossoms and fruits of plants such as nickerbean, firebush, jasmine, orchids, roses, Washington fan palms, hibiscuses, garden greens, squashes and melons. Their tendency to eat ornamental plants can make them a nuisance to homeowners. Notes Len, "They have very sharp claws for climbing and digging. I'm concerned they might tear the lanai screen to eat some of my many orchids."

Adult green iguanas can also feed on bird eggs and dead animals. Juvenile green iguanas feed on vegetation, insects, and (rarely) tree snails. While enjoying their dinner, they can be destructive to our properties, causing damage not only to vegetation but also to cage screens. And they're messy, too, leaving droppings where they may—including inside accessible swimming pools!

## Permanent Residency

While the native range of green iguanas extends from Central America to the tropical parts of South America and some eastern Caribbean islands, they were first reported in Florida along Miami-Dade County's southeastern coast. Green iguana populations now stretch along the Atlantic Coast in Broward, Martin, Miami-Dade, Monroe and Palm Beach Counties and along the Gulf Coast in Collier and Lee Counties. In cleared habitats such as canal banks and vacant lots, green iguanas reside in burrows, culverts, drainage pipes and rock or debris piles. And as we have seen with Henderson Creek, man-made canals serve as ideal dispersal corridors to further allow iguanas to colonize new areas.



## Once Bitten, Twice Shy

The iguanas in Southwest Florida are not aggressive and will not intentionally harm humans or pets unless they are frightened or provoked. Even so, their teeth are serrated and can cause serious, deep bite wounds. Additionally, and as is the case with other reptiles, green iguanas can also transmit the infectious bacterium *Salmonella* to humans through contact with water or surfaces contaminated by their feces.

