FLORIDA INVADER: Tegu Lizards

The head and neck of a tegu are much thicker than those of a Nile Monitor. The fleshy, forked tongue is red. In young animals, the head is greenish (as shown here).

The body of Black-and-white Tegus is grayish and marked with dark bands with abundant light spots in between. Other tegu species are similarly marked, but base coloration may vary (as shown below).

Several tegu species have been found in Florida, including the Red Tegu (shown here) and the Gold Tegu, which has a yellow-tan base color.

The Black-and-white or Giant Argentine Tegu (*Tupinambis merianae*), native to South America, has become locally established in Manatee, Hillsborough, and Miami-Dade Counties due to releases or escapes of pets. Individual lizards belonging to several tegu species have also been captured in other areas in Florida. These large lizards grow to 4-5 feet long. Like Nile Monitor lizards, tegus are likely to eat the eggs and young of ground-nesting birds and turtles and could impact threatened and endangered species, including Gopher Tortoises. They are opportunistic predators and consume a variety of small prey as well as plant matter and carrion (dead animals). Black-and-white Tegus inhabit dry, upland areas with sandy soils, including natural, urbanized, and agricultural areas. Tegus could potentially become an agricultural pest or a source of bacterial contamination of food crops. These lizards may dig burrows, but also frequently invade the burrows of native Gopher Tortoises. They remain underground during late fall and winter months. Females lay approximately 5 eggs per clutch up to twice per year. Lifespan is 15-20 years.

Report sightings: www.IveGot1.org

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Authors:
Steve A. Johnson\textsuperscript{1,2} and Monica E. McGarrity\textsuperscript{1}
\textsuperscript{1}University of Florida, Gulf Coast REC, Plant City, FL
\textsuperscript{2} University of Florida, Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, Gainesville, FL

Footnote

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