There have been several books written over the past two decades on the captive husbandry of *Varanus exanthematicus* and its allies (Balsai, 1992; Coborn, 1994; Sprackland, 2001; Bennett and Thakoordyal, 2003). Some of these books contain husbandry advice which is now considered to be outdated by modern varanid husbandry standards, yet are still frequently sold in pet shops across North America and abroad. Given the popularity and prevalence of *V. exanthematicus* within the pet trade, as well as the general lack of appropriate literature on their care, there is a great demand for accurate and up to date husbandry information on this species among pet monitor lizard keepers, particularly the clientele of pet shops. Furthermore, with many reptile hobbyists unaware of herpetological and herpetocultural journals, magazines, newsletters, and online message boards, pet shop books, if well written, can help educate these hobbyists about the environmental and physiological demands of their captives, through a medium familiar to them.

When I first learned of Bayless’ then new book on savannah monitors in 2006, I did not know what to expect. Published by TFH Publications, a publisher of “pet shop” reptile care books known throughout the herpetocultural community for their poor editing and organization, recycled photographs (among other TFH herp books), and outdated husbandry advice, there was a great chance that it would live up to the poor reputations of many of their other titles. However, given Bayless’ devotion and significant contributions to the study of varanid lizards (see Mendyk and Aller, 2007), particularly African varanids (e.g., Bayless, 1994, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2008; Attum, et al., 2000), there still remained the possibility that his book would stand out from other books written on the same subject.

The book starts out with a chapter on natural history, which covers distribution, habitat, temperature, humidity, hibernation and aestivation, predators, taxonomy, and descriptions of each of the three species discussed in the book (*V. exanthematicus*, *V. albogularis* and *V. ocellatus*). Next is a chapter which pertains exclusively to behavior, with sections on intelligence, thermoregulation, swimming, aggression and combat, sociality, senses, and defensive behavior. The following chapter covers purchasing, quarantine, and establishment. The next two chapters cover housing and handling, and feeding, nutrition and growth, and is followed by a chapter on breeding, which summarizes data and observations reported by other authors on the captive reproduction of savannah monitors. The final chapter on health care discusses various health afflictions commonly seen in captive varanids, and includes a detailed synopsis of parasites known to savannah monitors in captivity. A literature cited, resource section, and index completes the
book.

In many ways, this book is not unlike previous titles from TFH, having careless editing mistakes including missing text and awkward grammar. A notable example of careless editing occurs halfway through the description of *V. ocellatus* in the first chapter, where the text is cut off after page 23, and immediately skips to the next chapter. A noticeable inconsistency occurs in the third chapter, on purchasing a monitor. With the exception of the first section of the chapter entitled “Monitor Addiction”, all successive parts to this chapter are inconsistent with Bayless’ writing style, and appear to have been written by someone else. This is not surprising, given that the vagueness, styling and formatting of this chapter could theoretically be used for other taxa; an interchangeable “cookie-cutter” insert usable in multiple reptile hobbyist books. In fact, the writing style of this chapter is reminiscent of the typical formatting used in many other poor reptile keeping books of the past.

Editorial blunders aside, there were a few sections which were disagreeable, or questionable in their inclusion within the book. The section on taxonomy, which includes a table listing morphometric measurements and scale counts for each species, may be confusing or too complicated for the average pet hobbyist to fully comprehend or even care about, especially when no comparative photographs of each species are provided to accompany the section. To further add to this confusion, Bayless goes through the trouble of arguing the validity of *V. ocellatus*, a species long-synonymized with *V. exanthematicus* (Mertens, 1942), as well as its subtle differences from *V. exanthematicus*. Yet, not a single photo of *V. ocellatus* is provided in the book. Lastly, after a seemingly long-winded discussion about *V. ocellatus* and its taxonomic validity, the reader isn’t even given the opportunity to completely review the evidence provided by Bayless for its alleged validity, because that portion of the text was left out by careless editing!

A few anecdotal reports of sociality, varanid senses, and “looping behavior” add little or nothing to this book, but were perhaps included to catch or maintain the interest of readers. I felt that the section on claw trimming was inappropriate and potentially misleading especially to beginner hobbyists, considering that varanid lizards do not require nail trimmings if their environmental needs are met. Encouraging hobbyists to do so may just further reinforce the anthropomorphic mindset already prevalent among many keepers which often hinders progressive and critical thinking towards the improvement of their reptile husbandry. Lastly, my final criticism pertains to the chapter on health care. Lacking were descriptions of appropriate treatments for the ailments described. However, I suppose one can argue that given the target audience of this book, it is probably best that beginner hobbyists do not attempt to perform veterinary procedures and treatments on their own.

Despite the many shortcomings of this book, there were a few positive aspects which stood out over several other published books on savannah monitors. It was encouraging to see a section devoted to defensive behavior rather than “aggressiveness”, as it is so commonly misrepresented to describe captive varanid behavior. Bayless discusses the fear and vulnerability which hatching and recently-imported individuals experience in captivity, something which many beginner monitor keepers seldom understand. Addressing these issues may help reduce the amount of stress exerted on newly acquired monitor lizards by unsuspecting, beginner keepers. Bayless also stresses the importance of variation in diet, advising keepers to offer an assortment of prey items, while stressing the importance of avoiding improper diets perpetuated by the pet trade, such as dog food and canned monitor lizard diet. Improper diet is a major contributor to poor health and premature death in captive varanids. Addressing these important issues in his book may help improve the current state of varanid husbandry among beginner hobbyists.

Unlike many other pet reptile books I’ve come across over the years, Bayless actually cites primary literature within the text; something which I fear will go unnoticed and unutilized by the book’s target beginner audience. It was quite surprising to see references cited throughout this book, as it would seem that for such a non-technical book, a literature cited section would be a considerable waste of valuable
page space, especially since all titles within TFH’s “Complete Herp Care” series are restricted by page length (128 pp). It was a relief to see new photographs used for this book, given the publisher’s previous tendency to reuse photos from other titles, and there were no noticeable errors in image captions.

Compared to most other savannah monitor books, Bayless does offer some sound, progressive advice to their captive husbandry, especially in regards to variation in diet, housing and substrate, which will hopefully be employed by those who read this book. Given the poor quality of most other books presently available on the captive husbandry of *V. exanthematicus* and related species, I suppose I would recommend this book to beginner hobbyists. However, I would not consider it to be an acceptable alternative to networking and speaking with other keepers and breeders, as one can likely receive more appropriate and useful husbandry advice and information from fellow hobbyists. Considering the book retails for only about $10 US (and substantially cheaper if purchased used), it would make an inexpensive addition to any varanid enthusiast’s library, even if just for the photographs.

My overall impression of this publication is that Bayless sought to produce an informative, semi-technical book, which turned out to be inappropriate for the publisher’s target audience. This is evidenced by the choppy and often inconsistent flow of the text, where some chapters appear to have been oversimplified, yet some remain semi-technical and likely confusing to a beginner hobbyist. Given his extensive dedication to, and knowledge of both wild and captive African varanids, I feel that Bayless’ efforts would have been better applied towards writing a book aimed at a more informed audience. Given this, I personally see this book as an unfortunate waste of his time, knowledge, ability and resources.

**Literature Cited**


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