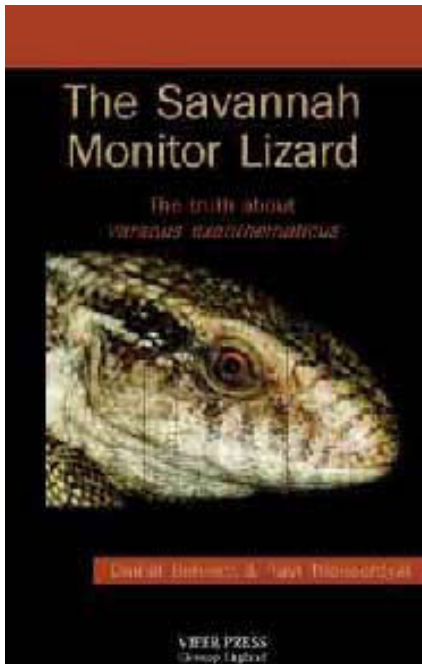

BOOK REVIEWS



The Savannah Monitor Lizard: The Truth About *Varanus exanthematicus*

DANIEL BENNETT and RAVI THAKOORDYAL
Viper Press, Glossop, UK. 2003. 84 pp.
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Over the past 20 years, there has been an abundance of books written on the proper husbandry of monitor lizards. I own at least three on the savannah monitor, *Varanus exanthematicus*, plus several others on monitor husbandry. So why do we need another one? It is my opinion that the savannah monitor is one of the two most misunderstood monitors regularly available to keepers (the Nile monitor, *V. niloticus*, being the other misunderstood monitor), which leads to many poorly maintained lizards. Thus, the quantity of books has not led to an increase in quality care for the monitors. However, the trend has changed with the publication of *The Savannah Monitor Lizard: The Truth About Varanus exanthematicus*. The information it offers should lead to healthier monitors and happier keepers.

The book is written in a logical format consisting of several sections. The main sections cover natural history and captive husbandry. Humor makes an appearance in several sections, and the information is the better for it. Although the present book is critical of previous husbandry books, such criticism is not belabored or personalized. The subsections are clear and concise while covering the critical elements. Although some subsections could probably have been combined, I actually like the amount of subsections. A new keeper should easily be able to find answers to some of the more common husbandry-related questions.

The book begins with a justification and a basic introduction to monitors. This information provides

a nice foundation for the remainder of the content. A dichotomous key is provided for identifying all of the African monitors. Although such a key is unlikely to be used by many readers, it may prove its worth for new keepers unfamiliar with monitors, or potential keepers verifying a pet store label. I am disappointed that while the desert monitor, *Varanus griseus*, is characterized as a “bad tempered lizard,” the Nile monitor is characterized as “lively.” I think this characterization misses an opportunity to caution potential keepers about the generally poor disposition of Nile monitors.

The second section of the book covers savannah monitors in the wild. I found this section to be the most enjoyable. Readers who never keep monitors may enjoy this section on natural history, behavior, conservation status, and other topics. The content is enhanced by references to field studies and the inclusion of graphs representing quantitative data. Further credibility is gained when one realizes the author (DB) is citing some firsthand research experience. One disappointment is the generalized range map for the savannah monitor. The section contains numerous references to specific countries and physical regions. A more detailed map would provide context for those references.

The captivity section details the methods used for successful monitor care and reproduction. This section is unlike many monitor care books, and is refreshing. Novices and experts alike can gain some insight into improvements to care, and begin to see husbandry from

the vantage point of the monitor. I appreciate the focus on monitor-friendly substrates and the warning that not all captive monitors will become tame. Heating is covered thoroughly, although I would have preferred see the “how should I check the temperatures” section mentioned before the recommended basking temperatures. I also find the foods section to be helpful for new keepers, and a good reminder for experienced keepers. I disagree with the emphasis on supplements, but this disagreement is minor. Aside from these minor points, I have a few more serious criticisms.

First, humidity is mentioned, but I am left uncertain what level of humidity the authors recommend. They mention the savannah monitor as a tropical lizard (p. 49); as a result, many keepers may inappropriately create a very wet, rainforest-type environment for their monitors. Second, consistent with previous monitor books, the authors suggest that additional monitors are not necessarily too much extra work. I find this suggestion an unfortunate carryover from older books. I have kept many monitors for many years, and even just one additional mouth to feed, and the extra space needed is noticeable. It is great when monitors get along in the same enclosure, but when problems arise, many people

do not have available space for another large enclosure. This problem is compounded by the authors’ suggestion that keepers should start with a few monitors, and that up to six juveniles will fit in a 91 cm (3 ft) aquarium (p. 46). Finally, I disagree with the statement that parasite checks are “absolutely vital” (p. 63). Ironically, if one follows all of the other advice in this book, parasite checks will be unnecessary, as a healthy monitor will keep parasites in check through natural means. These criticisms aside, the information contained in the section on captivity will lead to monitors that are healthier, happier, and more productive than those kept in the conditions described in previously published books.

The last section on further information is a nice addition. The reference list will be helpful to anyone interested in pursuing research articles, and the suggestion to travel to the home territory of savannah monitors is certainly a nice touch. Overall, *The Savannah Monitor Lizard: The truth About Varanus exanthematicus*, should be considered a required book for all new savannah monitor keepers. Even keepers of other monitors can benefit from the perspective of doing what is best for the monitor, and not what is easiest for the keeper.