

GILA MONSTER ENCOUNTERS

The Gila monster is venomous and caution should be used when one is seen. They should never be picked up or molested in any way: It puts one at risk and is in violation of Arizona wildlife regulations.

An encounter with a Gila monster should be an exciting and positive event. Few are fortunate enough to see a living individual in the wild. Though an inexperienced person may feel fear at first when faced with any wildlife, a little knowledge will allow one to appreciate the Gila monster as a unique animal species of the Sonoran Desert.

If you encounter a Gila monster, remember that you are much larger than it, and pose a threat that will likely put it in a defensive mode. Move away and remain calm. If it is encountered in the yard, move away, alert anyone in the vicinity, and restrain pets. If a Gila monster is left alone for a couple of hours, it will likely move on. If it does not leave after several hours or even after a day, you can contact the Tucson Herpetological Society, Arizona Game and Fish Department or the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum for advice. Your local fire department or animal control agency should be called only as a last resort, as they may relocate the animal to another area which may not contain suitable habitat.

The Gila monster's bite is a defensive measure. The teeth and venom cause considerable pain. Gila monsters hang on to whatever is bitten, working venom into the bite wound slowly, through grooved lower teeth. Few bites to humans have been reported, and nearly all are classified by the Arizona Poison Center as illegitimate bites, i.e., bites inflicted on a person who recognized the animal and the danger, but proceeded to put themselves at risk anyway.

Small children and pets may be at risk of Gila monster bites because of their natural curiosity; however, the Arizona Poison Center and local veterinarians report that very few children or pets have been bitten and that the risk is low. Nevertheless, parents and other care-givers should exercise caution when small children are playing in areas with adjacent natural desert. Ideally, children should learn about venomous and dangerous desert animals and how to avoid risky interaction with them.

What to do if a Gila monster bite occurs:

- Remain calm.
- Remove Gila monster using a stick to pry jaws open. Be careful after you have dislodged it.
- Transport bitten individual to medical facility immediately.
- Remove jewelry, watches, and restrictive clothing from affected limb.
- Immobilize limb below heart level.

What not to do if a Gila monster bite occurs:

- Do not apply ice to the bite area.
- Do not make an incision of any kind.
- Do not use a constriction bandage or a tourniquet.
- Do not administer alcohol or drugs.
- Do not use stun gun electric shock treatment.



From top to bottom: An adult banded gecko and a hatchling Gila monster on top of an adult Gila monster. The harmless banded gecko is commonly mistaken for a baby Gila monster.

CONSERVATION AND PROTECTION

On April 3, 1952, the Gila monster became the first reptile to be protected in Arizona and the first venomous reptile to be protected in the United States. It is protected throughout its range in both the United States and in Mexico.

Gila monsters are threatened by the activities of human beings. These include illegal collection, encroachment of urban areas into Gila monster habitat, mortality on roads, in swimming pools and wanton persecution especially prevalent on venomous reptiles.

If you have a swimming pool, you can contribute to the conservation of the Gila monster and other desert wildlife by using a floating escape device for animals unlucky enough to fall into the water. It can be as simple as a styrofoam board floating in the pool.

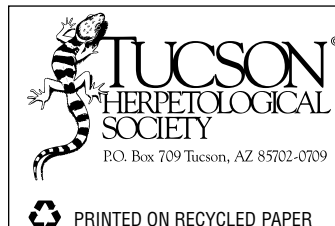
The best thing you can do for Gila monsters is to educate yourself, your family and your friends about the desert and its amazing animals.

Suggested reading:

- "The Venomous Reptiles of Arizona" by Charles H. Lowe, Cecil R. Schwalbe and Terry B. Johnson, Arizona Game and Fish Dept. Phoenix, Arizona. 1986
- "Poisonous Dwellers of the Desert" by Trevor Hare, Southwest Parks and Monument Assoc. Tucson, Arizona. 1995
- "Gila Monster - Facts and Folklore of America's Aztec Lizard" by David E. Brown and Neil B. Carmony, High Lonesome Books, Silver City, New Mexico. 1991
- "The Peterson Field Guide to Western Reptiles and Amphibians" by Robert C. Stebbins, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston. 1985

If you have specific questions about Gila monsters there are information phone lines that may help you.

- Tucson Herpetological Society (520) 760-0574
- Arizona Poison Control (520) 626-6016
- Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum (520) 883-1380 Ext. 311
- University of Arizona, Department of Ecology (520) 621-3187



The Tucson Herpetological Society is a non-profit organization dedicated to education, conservation and research concerning the amphibians and reptiles of Arizona and Mexico.

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If you live near a desert area you may encounter a variety of wildlife, including venomous reptiles. Many people have seen a rattlesnake, but few have seen a Gila monster. Although an encounter with a Gila monster may be scary, knowledge of this unique lizard can make an encounter a non-threatening, even enjoyable, event. Gila monsters are unique reptiles often associated with Arizona and the Sonoran Desert and play an important role in desert community ecology.

NATURAL HISTORY

The Gila monster (*Heloderma suspectum*) primarily inhabits the deserts and foothills of the southwest, ranging from southern Sonora, Mexico, north through the southern and western 2/3 of Arizona and adjacent portions of New Mexico, California, Nevada and Utah. The skin is beaded in appearance and the color pattern is black with orange, pink or yellow spots, bands or blotches.

The Gila monster is the largest lizard in the United States, weighing up to two pounds and reaching a total length of twenty inches, including the large tail which is used for fat storage. Gila monsters spend the winter in dens or burrows, often in rock crevices or boulder piles, emerging in spring to search for food and mates. They feed on newborn rabbits, rock squirrels, woodrats, and other animals which can not easily escape, as well as on the eggs of reptiles and ground-nesting birds.

Little is known about the reproductive behavior of Gila monsters in the wild, but mating in southern Arizona probably occurs in late April to early June. Females lay eggs around 45 days after mating, and baby Gila monsters take approximately 130 days to hatch, but are not seen until spring or early summer of the following year.

Gila monsters spend up to 98% of their time underground. They are most active in the spring, when they search for prey and mates. With the onset of hot weather in late May or June, they return to underground burrows. They may be active again during the rainy season of late July and August, but are less frequently seen then.

Gila monsters have many potential predators, such as hawks, owls, coyotes, mountain lions and kit foxes, but their color and pattern warn of a possible defensive venomous bite and serve as effective deterrents. Man seems to be the animal's primary threat



through collection, road kills, habitat loss and intentional (and illegal) killing.

GILA MONSTERS AND YOUR HOME

Watch your step:

Even though brightly colored, Gila monsters can be well camouflaged, blending into the shadows of desert shrubs. The advice usually given to avoid rattlesnakes, "watch your step," also applies to Gila monsters. Never put your hand or foot where you cannot see. Keep walkways cleared and well lit, especially during the early morning and evening hours.

Prey animal control:

Gila monsters may be attracted to resources in your yard such as water, prey animals or shade. Desert landscaping does not present animals with extra sources of water. If you have a rodent overpopulation problem, trap rodents with snap or other humane lethal traps, dismantle middens, fill other burrow holes and eliminate large brush tangles and junk piles. Caution should be used when clearing piles or tangles in case they are already occupied by a Gila monster or other venomous animals, such as Arizona brown spiders, bark scorpions, or rattlesnakes.

Deterrents:

Walls can be erected to discourage Gila monsters from entering an

enclosed space, such as a children's play area, swimming pool or lawn area. Swimming pools are death traps for Gila monsters and other desert wildlife and a wildlife-proof wall can prevent the unpleasant task of removing dead animals from your pool. We recommend a wall that will also discourage rattlesnakes. A solid wall four feet high with a four inch lip at the top angling outwards will exclude Gila monsters and most other terrestrial wildlife. The bottom of the wall should be sunk into the ground and have no holes or tunnels under it. Drainage holes should be screened with 1/4 inch hardware cloth. Keep in mind that there is no such thing as a 100% wildlife-proof fence. A Gila monster may be able to dig under all but the deepest walls. Several products that are on the market claim they repel snakes and other reptiles. Though fashionably marketed and high priced, there is currently no reptile repellent known to be effective, so be skeptical.

