

Nile Monitor Care Sheet

Common Name:

Nile Monitor

Latin name:

Varanus niloticus

Note: Nile monitors are illegal to own in New York State without a license. If you need to look at a care sheet for this species, you should think twice about owning a Nile Monitor: These are large, powerful lizards that almost never calm down. Their paranoid attitude leads them to see their keepers as threats all their lives, and they have no hesitation about defending themselves with blows from their tail, ripping with their talons, or bone-crushing bites from their vice like jaws - not to mention projectile defecation on their perceived aggressors. Almost any other monitor species (with the exception of the Komodo dragon) is better suited as a pet.

Native to:

Africa, from Egypt to South Africa. Found anywhere there is water.

Size:

Nile Monitors are typically 4 to 6 feet, although rare 8 foot specimens are known.

Life span:

10 to 15 years if given proper care.

General appearance:

The Nile monitor is a large, powerful lizard with a long neck and tail. Large powerful limbs are equipped with long talons. A flattened ridge down the back of the tail helps in swimming. A blue-purple forked tongue darts in and out of the mouth when the Nile monitor is in motion or interested. The ground color varies from white to yellow-green, with markings of gray to black forming a band across the eyes, hashes crossing the mouth, chevrons down the neck, bands of spots across the body, spots on the limbs, and rings around the tail. Usually, you will see its threat display - an expanded neck pouch, arched neck, body held high off the ground, tail cocked to deliver a powerful whipping blow, and a loud hiss.

Housing requirements:

Enclosure:

Even a small adult Nile monitor will need a set-up about the size of a dinner table or large sofa. Larger monitors will require an entire room for an enclosure. When converting a room for a monitor cage, remember that Nile monitors can dig through dry wall, so you will need to reinforce the walls. Avoid wire mesh in construction of your cage. This not only lets the heat and humidity out, but large monitors can dig even through heavy gauge hardware cloth. Limit ventilation, especially around the warmer side of the cage, in order to keep the humidity up.

Temperature:

The cool side of the cage should be between 75° and 80° F, with temperatures increasing to 90° to 100° F on the hot end with basking spots as large as the Nile monitor's body that reach 110° to 130° F. Night time temperatures can fall to normal room temperature.

Heat/Light:

A warm basking spot should be provided for this monitor by radiant light. Racks of flood lamps work well for this, plan on 3 to 4 lamps at 60 to 120 watts each. Adjust the height above the basking spot to reach the ideal temperature. Supplemental heat can be supplied by large, robust heat mats such as "pig blankets." The Nile monitor should be able to rest its entire body on the mat. Ultraviolet light is not necessary.

Substrate:

Dirt provides the best substrate. It needs to be deep enough to allow the Nile monitor to construct tunnels and burrows naturally. This provides not only security, but helps with regulating humidity and temperature. Beware, not all dirt is created equal. Go to a nursery or landscape supply business and choose a dirt that holds a burrow and humidity, drains well, is not too dusty, and does not turn to slime when wet. Fill the savannah monitor's cage to a depth of two feet.

Environment:

Be careful not to let your savannah monitor get too dry. Aim for humid-tropical air without making the cage wet. Savannah monitors become inactive in the dry season; a dry cage coupled with readily available food will lead to obesity and health problems. Logs and sticks, particularly hollow logs, provide exercise and entertainment. A large cat litter pan can be used for providing water. Live plants will quickly be destroyed by a curious and active monitor.

Diet:

Adult Nile monitors can be fed a staple diet of frozen-thawed mice or rats. Other food items will be eagerly accepted, but are not necessary for balanced nutrition - feed them only for your entertainment or that of the monitor. Juvenile Nile monitors can be raised on a diet of insects dusted with vitamin and mineral powder and appropriately sized rodents.

Maintenance:

Clean up feces and urates as soon as you notice them, inspect the cage at least once daily for cleanliness. Replace the water when it becomes soiled or dirty and scrub out the dish. The top substrate can dry out, but make sure it remains moist (not wet) underneath. Add a few buckets of water to the cage as necessary to keep the substrate slightly damp.

Other references or recommended reading:

Faust, Robert. Nile Monitors. Hong Kong: Barron's 2001.

Bartlett, R. D and Bartlett, Patricia. Monitors, Tegus, and Related Lizards. Hong Kong: Barron's 1996.

Bennett, Daniel. Monitor Lizards: Natural History, Biology & Husbandry. Frankfurt: Edition Chimaira 1998.

King, Dennis and Green, Brian. Goanna: The Biology of the Varanid Lizards. Kensington NSW Australia: New South Wales University Press 1993.