



## Meet the Monster!

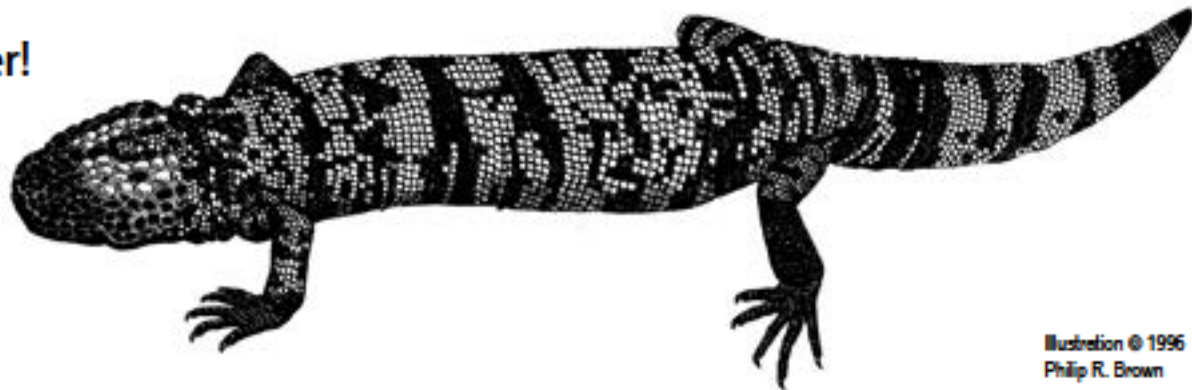


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Philip R. Brown

### Introduction

The Gila (pronounced HEE-lah) Monster is one of the best known, most often asked about, but least seen Sonoran Desert reptiles. One of only two venomous lizards in the world, it is the only one found in the United States. (The other venomous species, the closely-related Beaded Lizard, is found from southern Sonora, Mexico, to Guatemala.) Folklore, tall tales and Hollywood movies have endowed the Gila Monster with powers and potency far beyond those possessed by any actual creature. But the facts about this unique lizard are fascinating, and require no embellishment.

### Description

The Gila Monster is the largest lizard in the United States. It grows to 22 inches (560 mm) long, and to weights of over a pound. Its upper surface is covered with bead-like scales. It has a long rounded body, a big head, and a relatively short, rounded, tail. Short, stout legs possess long toes with sharp claws used in digging and climbing. The snout is solid black, and it has an

overall reticulated (netlike) or banded color pattern of black with pink, orange, salmon, or yellowish. Its scientific name is *Heloderma suspectum*. Helo = studded, derma = skin, referring to the beaded quality of the scales; and suspectum, because the scientist who described it didn't know that it was venomous, but suspected that it was.

### Natural History

Gila Monsters are primarily active during the day, in early morning or late afternoon, although they may occasionally be found out shortly after dark, particularly during the hottest weather. They are most often found out and about from March to May or June, but they may be seen abroad during any month of the year if conditions are to their liking. They may have a second, smaller "peak" in their activity during the summer Monsoon rainstorms.

Gila Monsters are not rare, but are not commonly seen. The major reason for this is that they spend most of their time underground. They may be out digging, hunting, basking, etc. on the surface for only a few hours of a few days per year; about 98% of the year is spent out of sight. They live in burrows, packrat nests, or caliche caves and dens, sometimes sharing their abodes with other reptiles such as snakes or desert tortoises.

Gila Monsters are easily overlooked. Their color pattern disappears in the dappled shade of a desert shrub, and the dark

snout is seldom seen in the shadows of their rocky retreats. They can easily detect nearby activity of a human or other animal, and will do their best to remain hidden, often by just backing in. If confronted or constrained a Gila Monster will bite; that's why it has venom — for defense.

Gila Monsters are carnivores. They eat newborn or young rabbits, young packrats and other rodents, bird eggs, nestling birds, lizards, and occasionally small snakes. A Gila Monster can eat enough in 3 or 4 springtime meals, when rabbits, rodents, and birds are nesting, to last it until spring of the following year. During such meals the lizard may eat up to 35% of its own body weight (over 50% in the case of young Gila Monsters). Fat is stored in the sausage-like tail. Their prey is also their main source of water. Gila Monsters seldom drink free water, although they will if it is available.



## Distribution & Habitat

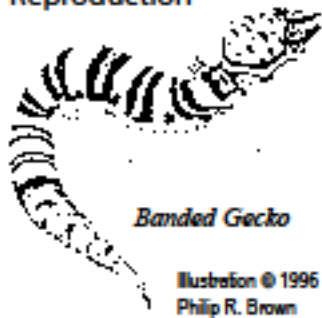
The Gila Monster is found in three of the four North American deserts. In the Sonoran Desert it is found from southern Arizona to northern Sinaloa, Mexico, in several habitats. At the outer edges of its distribution it occurs in southwestern New Mexico (Chihuahuan Desert), and in southwestern Utah, the southern tip of Nevada, and a short distance into eastern California (all Mojave Desert).

Two subspecies (geographical races) are recognized: the Reticulate Gila Monster, *Heloderma suspectum suspectum*, occurs from Sonora and extreme northwestern Sinaloa into southern Arizona and the southwestern corner of New Mexico. The Banded Gila Monster, *H. s. cinctum*, occurs

in the western and northwest parts of Arizona with adjacent isolated populations in Utah, Nevada, and California.

Gila Monsters occur in Sonoran desert scrub, Mojave desert scrub, desert grassland, and in Mexico, thornscrub. They often are found in rocky canyons, buttes, and mountains. They are found from sea level to approximately 5100 feet in the San Pedro River valley in southeastern Arizona. They avoid agricultural areas, and are not generally found in riparian (streamside) habitats.

## Reproduction



Banded Gecko

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Gila Monsters ordinarily lay 2 – 12 (average 5) eggs from mid-July to mid-August, coinciding with the start of the summer Monsoon season. The eggs may overwinter underground, or hatch with the young staying in the burrow and emerging the following May after an approximately 130 day incubation period. At hatching, the

newborn average 6½ inches long (165.3 mm) and about 1.2 ounces in weight (32.7 g). Even this is considerably larger than the size of an adult Banded Gecko (*Coleonyx variegatus*), a little thin-skinned lizard with which it is sometimes confused.

## Predation

Gila Monsters have many potential predators, such as coyotes, foxes, bobcats, hawks and owls. Young are more vulnerable to attack, and some predators dig up and eat the eggs. Adult Gila Monsters have little to fear. Their color

and pattern warn of a potential danger and deter some predators.

People are the Gila Monster's primary threat through collection, road kills, habitat loss and intentional killing.

## Venom and Bites

The venom of the Gila Monster is potent and painful, although seldom if ever fatal. Reports of deaths due to Gila Monster bite are rare, and most seem to be complicated by alcohol, drugs, or other health factors. Probably a reasonably healthy adult will not be killed by a bite, but young children and people with other medical concerns might be vulnerable. Gila Monsters produce venom in glands in their lower jaws. This is mixed with saliva and pulled into the wound along grooved teeth by capillary action. Thus, the longer the lizard hangs on or "chews," the greater

the amount of venom introduced. This is why Gila Monsters have the reputation of "hanging on like a bulldog." Their grip can be released by inserting a knife blade, credit card, stick, or other hard object between their teeth and the skin. Most Gila Monster bites, however, occur to people who try to handle or molest the lizard. Reasonably cautious people, who watch where they put their hands and feet, will not be bitten by a Gila Monster.

## Protection

Gila Monsters are protected by state law in each of the states where they occur: California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, and in Arizona, the first state to protect it and the first venomous reptile offered protection in the United States. It is also fully protected in Mexico. In Saguaro National Park, all plant and animal life, well as geological and cultural resources are strictly protected.

If you are lucky enough to see a Gila Monster in its natural habitat, enjoy the sight, take photos if you have camera, but do not attempt to touch it

otherwise bother it. The best thing you can do for Gila Monsters is to educate yourself, your family and your friends about the desert and its amazing animal life.



Saguaro National Park photo