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the green iguana

by Cyril Brass



It is not an everyday occurrence that one gets to see an orange colored iguana sunning itself on a lush bush from fairly close range. This particular iguana is actually a male from the Green Iguana species. Our boatload of travellers viewed this handsome lizard during a morning excursion on the interconnecting waterways of Tortuguero National Park in north-western Costa Rica. As the boat drifted quietly past, we all managed to get a close-up until this ancient looking creature realized all eyes and cameras were upon him and quickly disappeared. With accurate vision and keen sense of hearing and smell, iguanas are quick to flee and escape at any sign of potential danger.

Not surprisingly, the Green Iguana is predominantly green with variations in shades, tints and tones. Young hatchlings are a bright vivid green. As they grow the greenness fades resulting in a variety of adult colorations. The name Green Iguana is actually a bit of a misnomer as these reptiles can be brown, black, grey, turquoise and even orange. The varied coloration of the iguana's body can be the result of one of several factors such as air temperature, the creature's moods, its surrounding environment and breeding season.

The warmer the temperature is, the lighter and brighter the iguana becomes. A calm, happy and unstressed iguana exhibits brighter tones. The distribution and distinctive appearances of all iguana species throughout the world is localized by their habitat preference and adaptation.

The most visual change in coloration occurs during the breeding season when there is a significant increase in orange appearing all over the body. This striking pigmentation is not a permanent transformation and the orange color is most prevalent in males during the mating season which may last several months. Having this ability to change color does not make them similar to chameleons. The Green Iguana, unlike the chameleon, is unable to change its body color according to its immediate



surroundings.

Green Iguanas can be found over a large geographical region ranging from southern Mexico through Central America into South America and the Caribbean Islands. Their natural habitat consists of lush tropical rainforest areas near water sources like rivers and streams. This allows them to bask in the hot tropical sun and forage among branches overhanging slow moving water. Like all cold-blooded reptiles, iguanas need an external heating source to warm up their bodies.

I have seen several Green Iguanas enjoying their day in the bright sunshine in these unusual resting places. When looking for birds, monkeys and sloths high up on branches in the jungles, also be on the lookout for iguanas in the vegetation.

The Green Iguana is an arboreal lizard spending the majority of its day high in the forest tree tops, only

descending to mate, lay eggs or change trees. If there is a need to escape quickly it will dive into the water below.

On another boat excursion in the waterways of Tortuguero National Park, drifting slowing along a narrow channel, our group heard a loud splash nearby. All eyes and cameras focused on the rippling water, when from the water surface an iguana's head emerged. In little time, this skillful swimmer crossed to the other side of the river disappearing into the thick underbrush.

In all my travel adventures, I never thought I would have to watch for falling iguanas.

The Green Iguana . . . an excellent climber and swimmer . . . a sun-worshipping herbivore . . . a colorful creature indeed. **ca**

www.cyrilbrass.com