



Asian Water Monitors

Varanus salvator

ADVANCED · 5–8 FT ADULT · 15–20 YR LIFESPAN · DIURNAL · PROHIBITED IN FLORIDA

The big one. Asian water monitors are semi-aquatic lizards that reach 5–8 feet, swim like otters, and are bright enough to learn their keeper's routine. They are also a Prohibited species in Florida and restricted in other states, so check the law where you live before you fall in love. Most people who want one should not have one. The few who should are giving up a room, not buying a cage.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Advanced (expert only)
Ambient temp	82–90 °F day, 75–82 °F night
Basking spot	120–140 °F
Humidity	70–90%
UVB	Required
Diet	Fish, rodents, eggs, birds
Feeding	Every 3–5 days
Adult size	5–8 ft
Lifespan	15–20 years



Asian water monitors draw a crowd at NARBC shows. Almost no home can house one properly, which is exactly why this sheet exists.

Photo: Dan Lundberg / Wikimedia Commons · CC BY-SA 2.0

01

Before You Buy One

Start with the law: Asian water monitors are a Prohibited species in Florida, and restricted in other states and cities. Check your state and local rules before you buy, not after. Then the animal itself. A well-handled salvator can genuinely become dog-tame, and that reputation is what sells them. It also reaches 5–8 feet, with a bite and claws that put experienced keepers in the emergency room. Tame is not the same as safe.

02

Room-Sized Housing

Nothing sold as a lizard cage will hold an adult. The minimum for a grown salvator is 144×72×60 inches. The honest answer is a custom room with a pool deep enough to submerge in. **If you cannot give up a room, do not buy this animal.** Hatchlings start at 48×24×24 and outgrow it fast, so build the adult space first. No stage of this animal belongs in a rack. Never house two together: they fight over food and basking sites, and the bigger one injures or kills the smaller.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	48×24×24	60×30×30	Grows extremely fast; budget for the adult enclosure from day one.
Juvenile	72×36×36	96×48×48	Needs a large, swimmable water feature this early, not later.
Subadult	96×48×48	144×60×60	Bite force is already dangerous; handling takes real experience.
Adult	144×72×60	custom room with pool	Room-sized housing with swimmable water. Strong bite and claws; expert only.

Habitat-OS life-stage guidance: every stage is horizontal floor space, and no stage suits a rack.

03

Heat & Light

Monitors run hot. The basking surface should read 120–140 °F, measured on the surface with an infrared gun rather than guessed from the bulb's box. Ambient air sits at 82–90 °F and falls to 75–82 °F at night. Use a cluster of overhead halogen over a solid platform wide enough to heat the whole animal at once. Heat rocks have no place here; a monitor will sit on one until it burns. UVB is required: run a linear fixture over most of the enclosure.

04

Humidity & Water

Salvators are semi-aquatic, so water is habitat, not decoration. Humidity holds at 70–90%, easiest in a solid-sided enclosure with a large water body doing most of the work. The pool should let the animal float and fully submerge. Filter it or change it often, because a monitor will foul a pool the same day it eats in one. Dry air is what wrecks these lizards: chronic low humidity shows up as stuck sheds, sunken eyes and a quietly dehydrated animal.

05

Substrate & Enrichment

Go deep. A soil-and-mulch mix deep enough to hold a burrow does three jobs at once. It holds humidity, it gives the claws honest work, and it lets the animal get out of sight. Keep it damp at the bottom, drier on top. Skip loose sand, especially with young animals, because it packs into the gut and irritates eyes. Then add work: a sturdy climbing branch, a hide the animal truly fits, novel scents to investigate, and simple target training. A bored monitor becomes a destructive one.

06

Feeding

Carnivore, and an enthusiastic one. The rotation is fish, rodents, eggs and birds, fed every 3–5 days, with whole prey doing the nutritional work. Vary it; a monitor raised on nothing but rodents gets fat and dull. Never hand-feed. A lizard that learns hands mean food will hit a hand that has none, and this animal's bite is not a nip. Use tongs or a dish, feed away from the main hide, and watch the body, not the calendar: obesity is the common keeper error here.

07

Health Red Flags

Watch the mouth first. Drooling, cheesy material along the gums or a monitor that stops eating points at stomatitis, and it will not resolve on its own. Wheezing, open-mouth breathing or bubbling at the nostrils means a respiratory infection, usually a setup running too cool. In fast-growing juveniles, a rubbery jaw, bowed limbs or tremors mean calcium or UVB has failed. Any of these is a reptile vet this week, not next month. Weigh the animal monthly.

Husbandry data: Habitat-OS species library. Structure follows the NARBC show handout series. Every animal is an individual — when in doubt, ask the breeder at the table or a reptile veterinarian.