



Savannah Monitors

Varanus exanthematicus

INTERMEDIATE · 10–15 YR LIFESPAN · DIURNAL · DEDICATED BURROWER · SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Few lizards are sold as cheaply and kept as poorly as the savannah monitor. This is a stocky, intelligent digger from Sub-Saharan Africa that can tame down beautifully with patient work, yet it is emphatically not a beginner project. Many arrive as wild-caught imports, and the ones that thrive get what the wild gives them: room to roam, deep earth to burrow, serious heat, and insects rather than rodents.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Intermediate
Ambient temp	75–85 °F
Basking zone	90–105 °F
Night temp	68–75 °F
Humidity	60–80%
UVB	Recommended
Diet	Insect-led omnivore
Feeding	Every 2–3 days
Lifespan	10–15 years



Heavy forelimbs and stout claws built for digging: the savannah monitor's defining tools, and the reason substrate depth is non-negotiable.

Photo: Σ64 / Wikimedia Commons · CC BY 4.0

01

Strength First, Trust Second

Everything about a savannah monitor is heavy-duty: thick limbs, crushing jaws, a tail that whips. They're also genuinely intelligent, and that's your way in. Most settle with short, food-free handling sessions and a predictable routine. Many end up calm and boldly curious. But respect what you're holding. An untamed adult is strong and fast, and this is a species you win over in months, not weekends.

02

Housing by Life Stage

The enclosure is where savannah monitor keeping succeeds or fails. A hatchling can start at 36×18×18, but the endpoint is fixed: 8×4×3 feet minimum for an adult, 10×5 preferred (furniture-sized, usually custom-built). Floor space beats height: a ground-covering digger, not a climber. Racks are out at every age; so is cohabitation. They stress and fight. One monitor per enclosure. Build the adult home early; they grow into it faster than you'd believe.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	36×18×18	48×24×18	8+ inches of diggable substrate from day one; many are wild-caught.
Juvenile	48×24×24	72×36×24	Rapid growth with proper feeding and heat. Next size comes fast.
Subadult	72×36×36	96×48×36	Obesity is now the main risk: diet insect-based, not rodent-based.
Adult	96×48×36	120×60×48	18+ inches of substrate, 130–140 °F basking surface, custom build.

Enclosure minimums and preferred sizes from Habitat-OS life-stage guidance, grounded in varanid-specific research; dimensions in inches.

03

Heat & Light

Savanna heat is the job description. Run daytime ambients of 75–85 °F with a basking zone of 90–105 °F, falling to 68–75 °F overnight. For adults, get the basking surface itself to 130–140 °F with halogen floods over flat stone. Verify with a temp gun, because dial thermometers lie. UVB is recommended: a tube over the basking side, replaced on schedule, gives a diurnal lizard the daylight it expects.

04

Humidity & Water

Here's the mistake that shortens lives: treating "savannah" as "desert." These monitors spend much of the wild year in humid burrows, and captives need 60–80% humidity to shed cleanly and stay hydrated. You won't get there with a mister alone, but with deep, moisture-holding substrate that stays damp below the surface. Add a water pan big enough for a full-body soak, and expect it to be dug in, tipped, and soaked in.

05

Substrate & Digging

Digging is the whole enrichment program. Start hatchlings on 8+ inches of diggable substrate, a sandy soil mix that holds a tunnel without collapsing, and build to 18+ inches for adults. Pack it, furnish it with flat stones and half-buried cork, and let the monitor landscape the rest. A savannah monitor that can dig is busy and calm; one on paper towel or bare tile is a pacing, glass-surfing escape artist.

06

Feeding

Wild savannahs live mostly on invertebrates, and rodent-fed obesity is the classic captive killer. **Feed it like the insect-eater it is, not a rodent eater.** Offer gut-loaded roaches, crickets, snails, and other whole prey every 2–3 days, dusted with D3-free calcium at most feedings and a multivitamin weekly while growing, twice monthly as an adult; let the hot basking surface drive digestion. Rodents stay occasional. A lean, foraging monitor can see 10–15 years; obesity cuts that short.

07

Health Red Flags

Obesity is the emergency that doesn't look like one: fat rolls at neck and tail base, lethargy, a monitor that basks all day, hunts never. Add swollen joints or limbs, wrinkled skin, sunken eyes, mucus at nose or mouth, weeks without droppings. New arrivals need a reptile vet fecal check in the first month; parasites are the rule in wild-caught stock. Any swelling, wheeze, or refusal to eat with correct heat earns the same visit.

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.