



Nile Monitors

Varanus niloticus

ADVANCED · 5–7 FT ADULT · 15–20 YR LIFESPAN · DIURNAL · SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Nile monitors are among the biggest lizards on any reptile show table, and the ones fewest keepers should take home. They are fast, intelligent, semi-aquatic hunters from the savannas, grasslands and tropical forests of sub-Saharan Africa, never far from water. They defend themselves with teeth, claws and a tail that lands like a whip. Sold as hatchlings, they finish at five to seven feet. Check your state law first.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Advanced, expert keepers only
Ambient temp	82–90 °F day, 75–80 °F night
Basking surface	120–140 °F
UVB	High output, required
Humidity	60–80%
Diet	Fish, rodents, eggs, crustaceans
Feeding	Every 2–3 days
Adult size	5–7 feet
Lifespan	15–20 years



Nile monitors are among Africa's largest lizards, and one of the few animals at a NARBC show that most visitors should only admire.

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01

Read This Before You Buy

Nile monitors are a Prohibited species in Florida: no new pets, and existing animals need a permit. Other states restrict large monitors too, so check state and local law before you buy, not after. They are also an established invasive in south Florida, the result of exactly this pet trade. Beyond the law, temperament decides it. These are very large, powerful lizards, defensive by default and not handling animals. Expert keepers only, and taming is not on the table.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Every stage is horizontal, and no stage belongs in a rack. The table below is the Habitat-OS build path, and it ends somewhere most keepers never get. An adult needs 144×72×60 at minimum; what it actually wants is a custom room with a pool. Build that room before the animal arrives; a subadult outgrows commercial enclosures faster than you can frame one. Glass and screen will not hold a lizard this strong, so think custom-built framing, solid latches and sealed waterproof floors.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	36×18×24	48×24×24	Defensive from day one. Give a water feature deep enough to submerge in.
Juvenile	72×36×36	96×48×48	Aggressive temperament; whip-tail and bite risk grows with every inch.
Subadult	96×48×48	144×60×60	Rapidly outgrows most indoor enclosures. Plan the build now.
Adult	144×72×60	custom room with pool	Up to 7 feet, needs swimmable water. Expert-only, invasive in Florida.

Habitat-OS life-stage guidance, in inches (width × depth × height). Horizontal space at every stage, and no stage is rack-appropriate.

03

Heat & Light

Give a gradient, not a temperature. Ambient air runs 82–90 °F, with a basking surface at 120–140 °F and a night drop to 75–80 °F. That basking figure is not a typo; monitors thermoregulate hard and fast, and they need a hot, broad platform they can lay their whole body on, built from overhead halogen, never a heat rock. High-output UVB is required across the length of the basking zone, on a timer and replaced on schedule.

04

Humidity & Water

Hold humidity at 60–80% and expect the water to do most of that work. Nile monitors are semi-aquatic; they swim, soak, defecate and hunt in water, and a hatchling should already have a feature deep enough to submerge in. An adult needs a pool it can actually swim in, which is why the preferred adult setup is a room, not a box. Whatever holds the water has to be drainable and scrubbable, because you will be emptying it constantly.

05

Substrate & Enrichment

Deep substrate is enrichment, not decoration. Give a soil-based mix that holds a burrow when it is damp, deep enough for the animal to dig itself out of sight, and skip dry loose sand entirely. Add a heavy hide big enough for the whole body, sturdy climbing branches, and something new to investigate now and then; these are smart, busy lizards that get destructive when bored. Cohousing is out. Two Nile monitors in one space means fighting, lost toes and worse.

06

Feeding

Nile monitors are carnivores with a taste for the water: fish, crustaceans, eggs and rodents. Feed every 2–3 days and vary the menu rather than running an all-rodent diet; whole prey keeps calcium and phosphorus in balance. Never hand-feed. A lizard this size that learns to associate hands with food is a problem you cannot untrain. Watch body condition, not portion size, because captive monitors get fat long before their keepers notice.

07

Health Red Flags

The one specific to this species is rostral damage: a raw, scabbed or bloody snout from an animal pacing and pushing at glass. That is the enclosure telling you it is too small, and it does not heal while the cause remains. Watch also for a swollen jaw, cheesy material or drool around the mouth, sunken eyes, and lifted scales or dull patches from dirty water. Any of those is a reptile vet visit, ideally one who works on large monitors.

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.