

KOMODO DRAGON

Varanus komodoensis



Location: The Komodo dragon (or ora) can be found in the lesser Sunda region of the Indonesian archipelago. This includes the islands of Komodo, Flores, Rinca and Padar. Komodo is the largest of the islands, measuring roughly 20 miles by 12 miles. The Komodo dragon prefers to inhabit open lowland areas with tall grasses and bushes, but is also found on the beaches and in dry riverbeds. Young Komodo dragons are arboreal and live in forested regions.

Diet: Carrion is a large part of the diet of adult Komodo dragons. It is common for them to attack and eat a variety of large prey, including goats, pigs, deer, wild boar, water buffalo and smaller Komodo dragons. Juveniles are more mobile than adults are, actively hunting and feeding on insects, small geckos, rats, shrews, and ground-nesting birds and their eggs.

Komodo dragons ambush large prey and deliver a bite. They follow the injured animal until it succumbs to either blood loss or infection. The Komodo dragons' saliva contains more than 50 different strains of bacteria that results in the death of prey from infection after being bitten. The Komodo dragon locates its prey by following a scent trail.

Dragons frequently feed in groups; as many as 8 of them have been observed around a bulky carcass. The larger lizards monopolize the food, keeping younger individuals away by intimidating them or beating them off with sideways sweeps of their powerful tails. Once the bigger animals have finished eating, the smaller dragons are able to come in and feed.

Life Cycle: The dragons are primarily diurnal, and spend the night in holes among rocks, between the buttress roots of trees or in caves. Despite their great size, Komodo dragons are quick and agile on the ground. They occasionally climb trees, gripping them with their large, powerful claws and are good swimmers, taking long, powerful strokes with their tails. Although normally solitary, these animals come together to feed and breed. When these lizards meet, they establish a clear pecking order based on size.

The breeding season lasts from June to September. Courtship and mating often take place in the presence of small groups. Males engage in a ritual combat to mate with females. They wrestle in an upright position to try to throw the loser to the ground. The winning male locates a receptive female, rubs his chin on her head, scratches her back and licks her body. After mating, some males stay with their female for a few days to prevent other males from breeding with her.

Approximately 5 weeks after mating, the female digs a nest chamber in the warm, moist earth and lays between 12-18 eggs; some individuals may lay up to 30 eggs. She covers the eggs and leaves them to incubate unattended, relying on the sun to keep them at the proper temperature. There is no evidence of parental care once the eggs hatch. The young hatch roughly 8 months later. Each neonate is nearly 8 inches long. Komodo dragons reach sexual maturity at about 9-10 years of age. Komodo dragons are considered by many to be the largest living lizard. Adults range in length from 7-10 feet; males may weigh over 300 pounds.

Komodo dragons have an average life span of 50 years in the wild. When threatened, Komodo dragons use their sharp claws and powerful tails to deter intruders; they also tend to hiss menacingly. Once these lizards reach approximately 3 feet in length, they have virtually no natural predators.

Remarks: The Komodo dragon has a somewhat flattened body with a thick neck. This reptile has strong limbs and a powerful, muscular tail, which is about half the animal's total length. A male is generally brick or chestnut coloration; the female is greenish-black with a sprinkling of small yellow spots running down the neck. Juveniles are green with yellow and black bands.