

Chicken of the Trees

The GREEN IGUANA (*Iguana iguana*) ranges from southern México throughout tropical South America to the Caribbean islands. It depends on **external heat** to maintain its body temperature so it's often seen **basking in the sun**. Most iguanas are **arboreal** (living in trees), but they quickly **dive into water** to escape danger, and can run on land. This is the **longest species of lizard** in the neotropics—some males reach a **length of almost 2 m**. Iguanas have strong legs and a **whip-like tail** for defense.



Iguanas lay **leathery-shelled eggs**, which hatch just before the rainy season when food is abundant.

Young iguanas are bright green and fade to **grayish-green or brown** as they mature. Adult males may have splashes of orange or yellow on their heads during the breeding season.

Young iguanas prefer insects, but adults are **vegetarians**. Microorganisms in the gut help digest plant material. Digestion requires plenty of time basking in the sun.

Iguanas have been used as **traditional food** for over 7,000 years, and are sometimes called “chicken of the trees.” As human populations increase, the numbers of iguanas drop. **Breeding programs** in some countries help to replenish the species.