

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

GILA MONSTER

Heloderma suspectum

Family: HELODERMATIDAE
R044

Order: SQUAMATA

Class: REPTILIA

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The Gila monster is widely distributed in the southwestern U.S. One subspecies, *H. suspectum cinctum*, occurs in California. It is uncommon in a variety of desert woodland and scrub habitats in the extreme eastern Mojave Desert and in the Colorado Desert, principally in desert mountain ranges. There are very few well-documented records for the state. This lizard prefers the lower slopes of rocky canyons and arroyos but is also found on desert flats among scrubland succulents. It seems to prefer slightly moist habitats in canyons, arroyos and washes. In California, this species is probably only active in spring, summer and early fall, although it is active all year in the southern parts of its range.

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: These lizards are opportunistic feeders, taking nestling birds, rodents, small rabbits and squirrels, lizards, eggs of birds and reptiles, and possibly carrion. They seem to take anything that can be found on the ground, underground or in bushes (Stebbins 1954, Bogert and Del Campo 1956).

Cover: The Gila monster utilizes the burrows of other animals and may construct its own. Rock crevices and boulder piles are also used for shelter (Shaw 1950, Stebbins 1954, Bogert and Del Campo 1956).

Reproduction: Little is known about reproductive requirements. Eggs are laid in the soil in excavated nests, so the soil must be sandy or friable. Gila monsters may also require areas with exposure to the sun, and moisture (Stebbins 1954, Bogert and Del Campo 1956).

Water: This species seems to occur in areas that are moister than surrounding areas (Shaw 1950, Stebbins 1954). In captivity Gila monsters readily drink and will sit in water for days. They may require water.

Pattern: The Gila monster is a denizen of the lower slopes of mountains, where it frequents the moister canyons, arroyos and rocky areas with good shrub cover.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: This lizard is active at night and sometimes at dusk. In California it probably becomes active in mid-spring, staying abroad through the summer (Stebbins 1954).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Little is known of the seasonal movements of this species. It probably does not migrate.

Home Range: Little data can be found on California populations. In Utah, home range area

used was 6-66 ha during the spring to fall interval (Beck 1990).

Territory: No data.

Reproduction: Little is known of reproduction in California. In Arizona, breeding occurs from late April through early June (Lowe et al. 1986). Mating probably occurs underground. Female lays 2-12 eggs (average = 5) from mid-April to mid-August (Lowe et al. 1986). Initial studies found incubation requires 1 month (Stebbins 1954). However, Lowe et al. (1986) observed an incubation period of about 10 months.

Niche: Amateur herpetologists prize this species highly and will capture it whenever possible, thus increasing its rarity in California.

General Comments: This species is venomous and dangerous. Extreme caution should be exercised around this lizard (Storer 1931). No life history studies of *H. s. cinctum* have been conducted in California (Jennings and Hayes 1994). Anyone seeing a Gila monster in California should report it to the Director, Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720.

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