



Gila Monster

Kingdom: Animalia
 Phylum: Chordata
 Subphylum: Veterbrata
 Class: Reptilia
 Order: Squamata
 Family: Helodermatidae
 Genus: *Heloderna*
 Species: *Heloderma suspectum*



Photo courtesy of Tammy Singer

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** Gila monsters are native to southwest Utah, southern Nevada, southern California, southwestern Arizona and northwestern Mexico.
- They prefer desert grasslands that contain scattered cacti, shrubs, mesquite and grasses. They also inhabit canyon bottoms, arroyos (dry creeks) and rocky slopes.
- **Exhibit Location:** U.S.S. Antiquities

Characteristics

- Adults: average length = 21.5 inches; weight = 1.5-3 pounds
- Small pebble-like scales are black with a pattern of yellow, pink or orange covering the entire body except for the belly.
- Gila monsters have short, fat tails that help them balance and short, stout legs with sharp claws for digging.
- Gila monsters are venomous and can release venom from small grooves in their teeth
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** 20 years old; **In Captivity** up to 30 years old

Behaviors

- Gila monsters spend about 95 percent of their time underground, only emerging to hunt for food or to sunbathe. They are able to store fat in their large tails so they can go long periods without eating.
- They are usually solitary but come together for breeding, when males and females may share a burrow.
- They are slow moving and have poor eyesight. They use their forked tongues to find food.
- Gila monsters will either stand their ground and hiss or retreat if threatened. Since they are not fast, they use other methods to escape predators, such as camouflage.

Reproduction

- Male Gila monsters will wrestle with other males for the right to mate with a female: the largest and strongest generally wins.
- Breeding season usually occurs in early summer.
- Females dig a shallow hole in a sunny spot and lay 3-13 leathery, oval eggs in the hole and cover them with dirt or sand. In about four months, the baby Gila monsters break through the shell and crawl to the surface.
- Once the hatchlings reach the surface, they are completely independent.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** bird eggs, nesting rodents and rabbits, frogs, lizards, insects, centipedes, worms
- **At the Zoo:** small rodents

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** Near Threatened
- Gila monsters are suffering habitat destruction due to urbanization and agricultural development.
- Illegal capture for the pet trade has also caused populations to decrease.
- Many Gila monsters are killed by vehicles on roads built through and around their habitat.
- Those living in national or state parks are protected. Taking Gila monsters from the wild is prohibited in the United States and Mexico.
- Although their bite is painful, it is not lethal to humans. This does not stop people from killing them out of fear.
- Predators: Birds of prey, coyotes, humans.

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- The Gila monster and its cousin, the beaded lizard *Heloderma horridum*, are some of the only venomous lizards in the world.
- The Gila monster is named after the Gila River Basin in Arizona, where it was first discovered.
- Gila monsters cannot jump and run at a maximum speed of 1 mph.

Source:

- Hammerson, G.A., Frost, D.R. & Gadsden, H. 2007. *Heloderma suspectum*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2007: e.T9865A13022716. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2007.RLTS.T9865A13022716.en>. Downloaded on 17 July 2017.
- National Geographic. (n.d.). Gila Monster. Retrieved July 17, 2017, from <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/reptiles/g/gila-monster/>
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- Potter Park Zoo, retrieved August 14, 2017, from www.potterparkzoo.org/our-animals/reptiles-amphibians/gila-monster