

Marine Iguana

By Vicky West

Scientific Name: *Amblyrhynchus cristatus*
Irish Name: Ioguána mara oileáin Galápagos

The marine iguana is the world's only marine lizard and can only be found on the Galapagos Islands, which are located off the coast of South America. They are believed to have evolved from land-dwelling iguanas that drifted to the islands on logs 10 to 15 million years ago.



There are several sub-species of marine iguana, which have evolved depending on the island on which they live, and this leads to variation in size and colour among the species, ranging from 60cm up to 1.5m in size and weighing between 1-12kg, with males being larger in size than females.

Marine Iguanas and their Young

Marine iguanas live, on average, between 5 to 12 years in the wild. Mating usually occurs between January and April, during which time males become more brightly coloured with patches of red or green, in order to attract a mate. Males are often selected by females based on their body size, with larger strong males winning the females.

One month after courtship, females will lay between 1 to 6 eggs in a nest which she will have dug in either sand or volcanic ash. She may then watch over the eggs for a few days but after this will leave, allowing them to incubate for 3 months. When the young hatch they look and act like miniature adults and will have no parents to look after them.



Their Predators

The marine iguana's main predators are the native Galapagos hawk, and non-native species such as rats, which tend to feed on the eggs, cats, which can feed on the young iguanas and even dogs which can feed on the adults. Due to the rise in these non-native species on the islands, marine iguana are classed as vulnerable to extinction and so are a protected species.



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Marine Iguanas are herbivores, feeding exclusively on underwater algae and seaweed, and as such have developed a range of adaptations to achieve this. They have a short, blunt snout and razor-sharp teeth to allow them to scrape algae off the rocks, their tail is flattened to allow them to swim easily through the water, like a crocodile, and they have long, sharp claws so they can cling to the rocks whilst underwater or in strong currents. They also have special glands which are connected to their nostrils which allow them to remove the excess salt, taken in during feeding, from their blood. To remove the salt they then sneeze, however, when sneezing salt often lands on their heads giving the appearance of a 'white wig'.

When feeding the iguana can dive down to depths of 15m, however shorter, shallower dives are more common. As a cold-blooded animal, the marine iguana can only spend a limited time in cold water diving for food, and afterwards it must lie in the sun to warm up. Their dark grey colouring helps them to better absorb sunlight, speeding up the warming process, because until it can warm up it is unable to move effectively, making it vulnerable to predation.

