



Argentine Black and White Tegu (*Salvator merianae*)

By: McKayla M. Spencer and Sarah Funck

Background:

The Argentine black and white tegu (*Salvator merianae*) is a large, terrestrial invasive lizard species found in the southeastern region of the United States and is currently established in Florida^{5, 7} and Georgia³. Argentine black and white tegus are native to parts of South America including Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Argentina, and were originally introduced to the U.S. through the pet trade. Species distribution models predict that most of the southeastern U.S. provides suitable habitat for tegus^{2, 4}.

Identifying characters:

As adults, Argentine black and white tegus can reach a total length of up to five feet (1.52 meters). There are no native lizard species in the southeastern U.S. that grow to that length; thus, the only concern is distinguishing hatchling and juveniles of this species from other non-native lizards. Tegus hatch from eggs with their characteristic mottled black and white coloration, often appearing as a banded pattern across their back and tail. Hatchlings may have bright green coloration on their heads that fades at approximately one month of age.

Impacts to native wildlife:

Argentine black and white tegus cause direct negative impacts to ecosystems through their consumption of native species and may potentially spread non-native parasites to native species. Diet components for this species consist of fruits, invertebrates, vertebrates, and, in introduced range in the southeastern U.S., even some imperiled species such as gopher tortoise hatchlings (*Gopherus polyphemus*)⁶. Tegus are also known to consume eggs and may pose a threat to the nests of ground-nesting birds, including eastern wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*) and northern bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*), American alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*), American crocodiles (*Crocodylus acutus*), and other turtle species. Tegus can carry the non-native nematode, *Raillietiella orientalis*, which is a parasitic pentastome introduced to Florida by another invasive species, the Burmese python (*Python molurus bivittatus*)¹. Tegus act as another pathway for this non-native parasite to continue spreading to native reptiles in the U.S., and it has already been found in some native snake species in Florida.

What to do if you find one:

Argentine black and white tegus are invasive to the U.S. If one is found in the wild, capturing and humanely euthanizing the animal following the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) guidelines for humane killing of reptiles is recommended. However, a large wild tegu has the potential to inflict harm when captured so please exercise appropriate safety measures and precautions. Please report any tegu sightings in the southeastern U.S. to the respective state wildlife agency.

In Florida, if a tegu is observed and/or captured and you are not able to humanely kill the animal, you can report it through the IveGot1 phone app, the IveGot1.org website, or call the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Invasive Species Hotline at 888-Ive-Got1 (483-4681) to report it and request technical assistance. When reporting observations, take a clear photograph and note the exact location of the tegu. This information will help a biologist confirm the species and coordinate rapid response if feasible. Outside of Florida, tegu observations can also be reported at <https://www.eddmaps.org/report/>

Additional resources:

1) UF IFAS Extension Argentine Black and White Tegu:

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/UW482>

2) Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Species Status:

<https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/profiles/reptiles/argentine-black-and-white-tegu/>

3) South Carolina Department of Natural Resources Species Status:

<https://www.dnr.sc.gov/wildlife/herps/tegu.html>

4) Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Non-native Species Article:

<https://www.outdooralabama.com/articles/adcnr-strengthens-safeguards-against-nonnative-species>, if Tegu is seen, call 334-242-3467 and ask for Nongame Wildlife Program Coordinator or invasive species handler

5) Georgia Department of Natural Resources Species Sheet:

<https://georgiawildlife.com/tegus>

6) Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Training Resource:

<https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/nonnatives/python/humane-killing-methods/>

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