

DISCOVERING GALAPAGOS

Volcanoes & Land Iguanas 1/2

Background

Galapagos iguanas are thought to have arrived in the Galapagos archipelago by floating on rafts of vegetation from the South American continent. It is estimated that a split of iguana species into Land and Marine Iguanas occurred around 10.5 million years ago. In Galapagos, 3 species of land Iguanas now exist. The Land Iguanas include: *Conolophus subcristatus* (found on 6 islands), *Conolophus pallidus* (found only on Santa Fe Island) and a third species *Conolophus rosada* (known for its pink colour) is found on Wolf volcano on Isabela Island.



Habitat

Land Iguanas are found in the drier areas of the island. Being cold-blooded, to keep warm they bask in the sun and on the volcanic rock, escaping the midday sun by finding shade under vegetation and rocks, and sleeping in burrows to conserve their body heat. Land Iguanas feed on vegetation such as fallen fruits and cactus pads and even the spines of prickly pear cactus.



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Reproduction

Between 6 and 10 years of age, male Land Iguanas become highly aggressive, fighting for the attention of the female Land Iguanas. Mating then takes place at the end of the year and eggs are usually laid between January and March (June on Fernandina!). However, in order to lay these eggs female Land Iguanas have no option but to scale to the summit of volcanoes.



The Volcanic Importance

Every pregnant female will need to find a patch of volcanic ash; these pockets of warm soft soil are perfect for the incubation of their eggs; however these sites are difficult to come by. The best sites are warmed by the volcanic fumaroles (vents) which are found at the rim of the volcano. Therefore Land Iguanas have to undertake a gruelling climb up the steep sided volcanoes, which can take weeks to complete, just to reach their nesting area.

However, doing this will not guarantee a place. If the best spots are taken the female must challenge other females for their nesting site. The losing female will have to find a new site in a less prime location. This could mean descending into the volcano. This is a difficult route that could even be life-threatening (with land-slides and slipping a danger). Once the Iguana has a place she will lay around 2 - 20 eggs in a 50cm deep burrow, nests are then guarded for a few days to prevent other females filling the nests with their own eggs. If all has gone to plan and the soil is soft enough, the young hatch after 85 - 110 days taking up to a week to dig themselves out of the burrows.