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Mad about **MONITORS**

They say there is a fine line between passion and obsession when it comes to keeping certain reptiles. Christian Castille caught up with his friend Steve Foo to find out what happens when this line becomes blurred.

Monitor lizards tend to suffer bad press, in much the same way as Burmese and reticulated pythons. They are often regarded as being unmanageable pets for the average person.

Thankfully, there is someone out there who is addressing such views, separating fact from fiction, and shining a positive light on these lizards. Steve Foo is one of the most well-respected monitor keepers and breeders in the UK, although he is probably better-known to many as Monitor Mad, which is his moniker on most forums where these lizards are discussed.

Early interests

Steve's love of the natural world started at a very young age, at about three years of age, when he would accompany his father on fishing trips. As he grew older, the prospect of sitting and waiting hour upon hour for a fish to take the bait did not hold his attention for long. He would often wander around the lakes, ponds and canals looking for something of interest, under strict instructions not to stray too far from his father!

It was commonplace to find lots of frogs and newts in these areas, so catching them became a game in its own right. As Steve became increasingly fascinated by such animals, and before long, he had discovered grass snakes and slow worms as well.

It wasn't an odd sight for his mother to see him come home from a weekend of fishing with muddy knees, pockets full of frogs, a bucket full of tadpoles, a pillow case of snakes and a plastic Tupperware box accommodating a few common lizards.

This concept probably seems very bizarre for younger readers today, but bringing home animals that you had caught was the typical thing that young boys used to do back then, some thirty years ago.

Just like most children at that stage, young Steve would keep these animals for a few days until the next fishing trip came round, and then he let them go again. As not uncommonly happened, these early contacts with wildlife led to Steve gaining a lifelong passion about animals.

When he became older, as a young teenager living on the outskirts of Liverpool,

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he would often go to places such as Ainsdale, looking for wildlife. One of the animals that caught his attention was the endangered natterjack toad, which he is still passionate about today.

The start of a collection

Amphibians became a big part of his life at this stage, and unlike many people, he admired them for their beauty. This led him to purchase his first exotic animal – an axolotl. Soon afterwards, he acquired some tortoises, European lizards and a gigantic cane toad, all of which were couriered to him from a shop called the Serpentarium, which back then was the only real place which ever advertised exotic pets for sale.

Restricted funds while he was still at school, combined with limited space, meant that his collection did not grow significantly for a time, but his interest continued to develop. Throughout this time, he was constantly on the lookout for as many reptile books as he could find, which enabled him to sit and dream about what he might have one day.

Inspired by television

Whenever a natural history programme that was likely to feature reptiles was due to be screened, he was there. Perched on the end of the sofa, his supper on his lap getting cold with his eyes fixed to the screen, he would

absorb all the information that flickered towards his ears.

Then one night, there was a David Attenborough documentary being shown. This one wasn't like the rest – it really made Steve sit up and immerse himself totally into the programme. It was about how Nile monitors stole eggs from crocodiles, by raiding their nests. His heart was pounding and racing as he watched – it was a feeling that he didn't understand.

He begged and pleaded with his parents to take him to the zoo. They were happy to do so, as they felt it might help him to see if this was his vocational calling in life.

Initial contact

The odd thing was while he was there, he looked at the other reptiles, and even the amphibians that had been where his passion started, yet his interest was now drawn elsewhere, to a new group of reptiles with which he had no experience – monitor lizards.

Hours were spent in front of the reinforced display glass, nose pressed firmly against sheet that separated Steve from the animal which took his breath away. Week after week he would keep returning to the zoo to watch these magnificent animals eat, sleep and just live.

The way they moved, flickered their tongue like a snake – he watched and was transfixed by everything about them. He made a promise to himself that one day, he would make sure he kept some!



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is available today. Not for nothing is this period now described as the dark ages of reptile keeping!

Since then, Among those represented in his collection are the Argus monitor (*Varanus panoptes horni*), Mertens' water monitor (*V. mertensi*), the Biak tree monitor (*V. kordensis*), the roughneck monitor (*V. rudicollis*), the rock monitor (*V. albigularis*), the water monitor (*V. salvator*), and of course, the species that first started his interest in the group the Nile monitor (*V. niloticus*).

Let's not forget to mention the number of captive-bred individuals that exist in other collections as well, thanks to Steve's determination to understand these lizards and their requirements, persuading them to breed successfully.

Unsurprisingly, he is now well-known internationally for his work with monitors, and owns the largest UK collection of the very rare Mertens' water monitors. He is often to be found chatting with fellow keepers at reptile shows, both in the UK and also abroad, at events such as Hamm and Houten, with his stock being highly sought-after, because of its quality.

This is a very different situation from how Steve built up his collection, spending all his free time driving to reptile shops up and down the country, to see whether they ever had any interesting monitors available.

A necessary career change

After finishing at secondary school, Steve decided to go into farming and went to Reasheath College of Agriculture after which, he moved on to work on a dairy and beef farm in Devon. After two years of working with the cattle there, he finally decided that it really wasn't for him.

He had thought that by taking this job, it would help to overcome his desire to work with reptiles, but it hadn't done so. Furthermore, the money was not great, and also, there really wasn't anywhere for him to keep any exotic pets, which was something that he had been determined to do on a larger scale after leaving school.

So after a family discussion, he agreed to move up to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, undertaking a new job in the family food manufacturing business. Before long, Steve's life was transformed, as he found a nice place to live, and with a better salary, it meant that he could begin to realise his ambition to establish a reptile collection.

He started out by purchasing a several different reptiles, including a huge alligator snapping turtle, and while he was passionate about these, he still felt there was something missing.

Life with monitors

Then, soon afterwards, he purchased his first-ever monitor, and like many people, he chose a Bosc's monitor. This single lizard made such an impression on him that he then brought two Nile monitors.

It was about 18 years ago now, at a time when everything was trial and error. There was nothing like the range of products, such as specialist lighting equipment, that



“ Steve’s passion for monitors has continued to grow. He has kept over 100 monitors belonging to over 16 species.”

Family involvement

Few people are actually in the situation of being able to keep one or may be two of these large lizards. The space required and the costs involved, not to mention family life, usually act as a restraint. Steve, however, doesn’t mind sacrificing his attic and household generally to these lizards.

It obviously helps that his loving wife Debbie understands and appreciates his passion for them. In fact, most of the enclosures that Steve uses to house his monitors were actually built by her!

There often tends to be negative press stories generated around keeping larger reptiles in general, and this includes monitors. One of the reasons I wanted to feature Steve wasn’t just because he is a lovely guy, but to show how if you are really dedicated, then these large, powerful lizards can influence your life in a positive way.

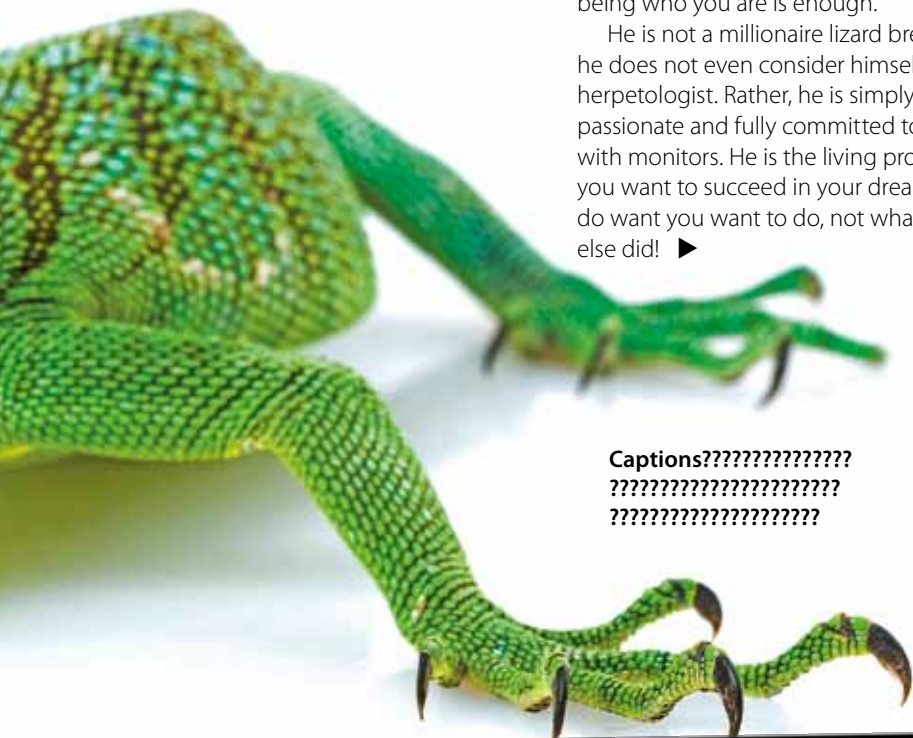
With nearly 20 years of keeping and breeding monitors Steve happily gives up a lot of his time to help people with advice

on forums, over the phone and in person. This speaks volumes for me, and yes, while monitors can be considered nasty, if you use commonsense when keeping them, then you can be rewarded with a great pet and a overwhelming friendship between man and lizard.

Today, Steve still works in the family business but also enjoys spending his weekends working at his local reptile shop, Blaydon Exotics. He still has many dreams, and these are being realised even now. He is working on breeding many of the rarer species of monitor lizard, so as to allow them to become more popular in the trade.

In my opinion, Steve is a unsung hero in the hobby, who you might not normally even hear about, as he is not too keen on making himself known. Almost every day, I hear about people wanting to be a professional reptile breeder or the next Steve Irwin. There is nothing wrong with wanting to aim high, or follow in someone’s footsteps, but as Steve has shown, just being who you are is enough.

He is not a millionaire lizard breeder, and he does not even consider himself to be a herpetologist. Rather, he is simply totally passionate and fully committed to his work with monitors. He is the living proof that if you want to succeed in your dream, then do want you want to do, not what someone else did! ▶



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In conversation with Steve Foo

Q *What's your dream monitor lizard to keep?*

A The monitor lizard species that really catches my eye and the one that I would love to keep and breed is the so-called Bell's phase of *Varanus varius*, which is probably better known as the Lace monitor. These Australian varanids are really stunning medium to large size monitors, with black, white and cream banding and have the most striking appearance of any monitor in my view.

Q *With the new research into monitors having venom glands, does this put a new spin on keeping them for you?*

A The new research has led to the discovery of venom glands in a few species, of which the Komodo dragon (*V. komodoensis*) is the best-known and documented. But the lesser-known desert monitor (*Varanus griseus*) is also thought to use a type of venom. Nevertheless, apart from that of the Komodo dragon, the venom is mild by 'snake standards' and the vast majority of species are harmless in this sense, so I'm very comfortable around the species I currently keep.

Q *Monitors are always recommended for expert keepers only, with many misconceptions still surrounding them. How do you feel about this?*

A With the advances in knowledge about the correct care and housing requirements that they need, so this makes them easier to keep. But it is very

much a question of looking into the individual species, rather than a general view. Obviously, size remains a very important consideration, in terms of housing and management in general.

Q *How would you advise someone who is interested in keeping monitors for the first time?*

A First and foremost, you must research the species you want to keep as thoroughly as possible, and be sure that you can provide adequate accommodation. Also, bear in mind the ultimate adult size that a hatchling can reach. Probably the worst monitor to choose, out of those that are readily available is actually the Nile monitor. It can grow up to 2.1m (7ft) or more, and has a very suspicious nature, which makes these particular monitors very unsuitable for most keepers.

Q *What advice would you give to someone who is considering buying a monitor but doesn't want a Bosc's?*

A Always start if possible with a captive-bred individual. Dwarf species such as Ackies (*V. acanthurus*) are the very best starter monitor, being full of character and pretty friendly lizards. They only grow to about 61cm (24in) long, making them relatively easy to house and handle when necessary. If you are set on having a larger species, then I would recommend an Argus monitor, which is an amazing and very striking monitor that is unlikely to grow larger than 1.4m (4.5ft).

Q *Have you had any amusing happenings as a monitor keeper?*

A I have a couple of particularly memorable moments keeping my monitors. On one occasion, I was changing the water in my Nile monitor's enclosure when he suddenly charged unexpectedly at me. I had such a fright that I tipped all the water over myself, and ended up soaked!

On another occasion, I came in from work and Deb, my wife, arrived back home at the same time. When we went into the house, I just had a feeling that something was wrong.

Sure enough, Deb shouted to me to come upstairs, and there, sitting on the bed, was Gizzmo, my 7ft (2.1m) black-throated monitor. He had escaped out of his vivarium and just sat there looking at us, without a hint of panic or even any indication that he was bothered!

Q *What does the future hold?*

A There are not that many breeders of the larger or rarer type monitors, so my own personal project is to breed some of the larger monitors such as the Argus and Mertens' water monitor. I am also keen to breed some of those that are rare in the trade, such as the roughneck monitor and the Biak tree monitor.

Primarily, I am an avid keeper of varanid lizards. They are my passion but in the future, my plan is to set up a decent pet shop offering exotics, with a larger than average display area for varanids. Most reptile shops that I've visited simply have an obligatory caiman or green iguana on show! ■



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