

## Reptile Aggression

*Synopsis:* Reptiles are wild animals and may become aggressive. Some herps are more likely to bite than others, especially those with irascible personalities. Other reptiles may become aggressive due to sexual maturity, territoriality or fear.

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Reptiles can be great pets. For those of us who are fascinated by reptiles and amphibians, it is important that we remember that these animals are truly wild animals. Some are captured from the wild and imported into the country for sale. Many are now being bred and reared in captivity, but even those are often only a few generations from their native habitat. They are not domesticated animals, like dogs and cats, mammals that have lived in harmony with humans for thousands of years.

Reptiles often react based on instinct. On occasion, when a reptile reacts to a stimulus, the owner may perceive this as a specific action directed at them. For example, a hungry snake may strike at a hand reaching into the cage to change the water. An owner might end up with hurt feelings (as well as an injured hand) because of the bite, when the snake was just striking at what it thought was a meal being delivered! It is important to not take an aggressive act personally, but it is important to try and understand just what provoked an attack.

When discussing aggression, it is often divided into several types. Defensive aggression occurs in response to what a reptile perceives as a threat, what could be a real threat or when a herp defends its territory. Let's explore defensive aggression. A shy or reclusive reptile may feel threatened under conditions where someone moves quickly around it. Some herps are prey species, meaning that they often end up as a meal for another animal. These animals are justifiably nervous about sudden movements occurring near them! Very shy herps are best not startled in order to prevent a bite.

Many herps are territorial. If you've ever lounged by an outdoor pool in Florida, chances are you've seen territorial displays performed by male anoles. A male encroaching on another's territory will be greeted by a display involving head bobbing, push-ups and exposing the red dewlap. An amorous male will also display in a similar fashion towards females in the area. While this display is amusing to human observers, the display to another male anole is meant to threaten him, bullying him to move away. If you are courageous enough to scoop up a male that is fired up, you can expect to be bitten more readily. While a nip from a little anole isn't likely to injure anything more than your dignity, imagine the same type of territoriality when it occurs in a mature, male green iguana! Male green iguanas should not be housed together, within sight of each other, or even in the same room if at all possible. There have been many instances where a mature male, during breeding season (usually in the spring) has attacked a person entering what it perceives to be its territory. In addition to sharp teeth, a strong bite and fast reflexes, the iguana also is able to use its powerful tail as a whip. Several iguana owners have been attacked by large males, requiring plastic surgery to repair the bite wounds to the face!

Offensive aggression is more likely to occur among herps that are naturally pugnacious. Tegus and monitor lizards are considered more aggressive species. These lizards are hunters, and while they may occasionally become a meal for other animals, they are much more likely to defend themselves. Veiled chameleons are also considered to be more aggressive than other species of chameleon. Venomous herps often have an attitude of near invincibility. They seem to know that they are "bad." Cobras and some venomous vipers are quick to anger, and as soon as they perceive a threat, they prepare to strike. A warmed up Gila monster, after spending some time sunning, may be more

inclined to turn and bite, rather than slink off, away from confrontation. If you've ever encountered a wild snapping turtle, you have seen offensive aggression in action. After a rainstorm, I spotted a mature female snapper in a parking lot at the mall. Predicting disaster whether I left her in the lot or whether I tried to move her to safer ground, I chose to try to help. With the help of my intrepid husband, a leather belt (expendable) and an umbrella, we were able to evacuate her to a nearby pond without suffering from any bites or loss of fingers (definitely **not** expendable!)

Acquired aggression is the last form, and it may occur at the onset of sexual maturity. It is also seen during breeding season, among healthy adults in condition. Large, adult male pythons become very restless during breeding season, and have the ability to become very dangerous adversaries, striking and coiling around an unsuspecting keeper, if given half a chance. It is very important that keepers stay very focused when working with and feeding mature pythons and other species of snake to prevent severe injury.

Many mature herps should be kept isolated from each other, out of sight of conspecifics. They also should not be allowed to view themselves in mirrors, which can provoke a display. To prevent painful bites, owners should be wary about handling herps when they are basking and their body temperature is at the warmest.

If you follow the advice here, chances are you won't find out how painful a bite from a herp can be. However, accidents do happen. If you should suffer from a bite from any herp, you should seek professional medical care. Many snakes and lizards carry potentially dangerous bacteria in the mouth area, and teeth can cause deep puncture wounds, driving organisms deep into the tissues. Immediately after a bite, wash the wound with povidone iodine soap or antibacterial soap for at least ten minutes, with hot running water. Douse the wound with hydrogen peroxide and then call your health care professional. Often, antibiotics are prescribed to prevent serious infection.

If a pet reptile bites you, do not strike or try to discipline it. It simply won't understand, and it will become more fearful or more aggressive as a result. Try to ascertain why it bit you: was it hungry? scared? defending its territory? in breeding mode? Try not to take it personally. After all, it was probably only doing what comes naturally!



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