

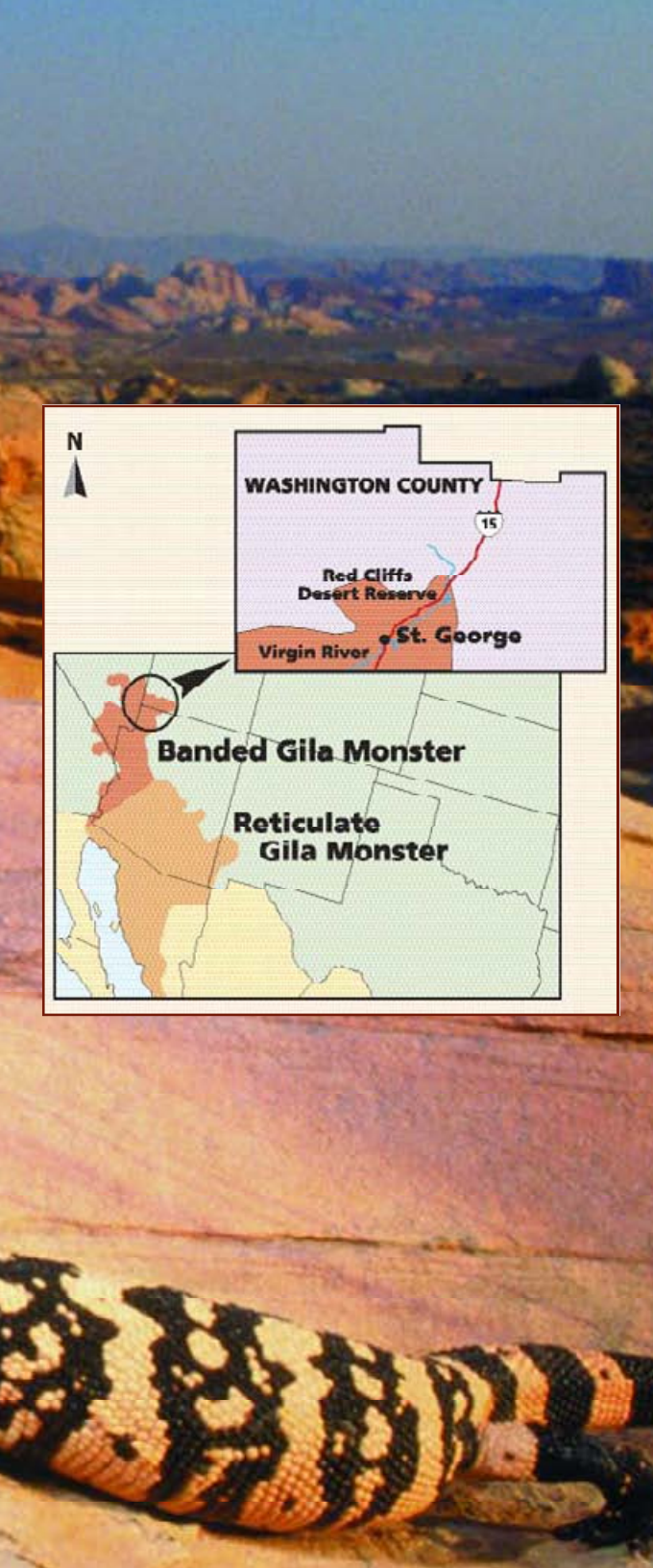
Gila Monsters in Our Midst:



Living With an
Ancient Native
of St. George

If you live, work or play in the desert around St. George, you may come upon a Gila Monster. The Gila Monster is an ancient native of St. George; its relatives roamed other parts of Utah alongside Tyrannosaurus dinosaurs nearly 100 million years ago. Today, Utah Gila Monsters are found in a part of Washington County where the beautiful Mohave Desert barely enters our state. This pamphlet provides information to make your encounter with a Gila Monster an interesting experience, rather than a scary one.





Gila Monsters from Washington County, Utah, are helping to treat diabetes!

In the 1980s, a peptide called exendin-4 was discovered from Gila Monster venom samples that originated in southwestern Utah. Exendin-4 has become a leading new drug for treating type 2 diabetes that afflicts more than 17 million Americans. The new drug, now known as Exenatide, can be synthesized in the laboratory and it is no longer necessary to extract exendin-4 from Gila Monsters. It is no exaggeration to say that Gila Monsters from Utah's Dixie are helping people cope with diabetes.

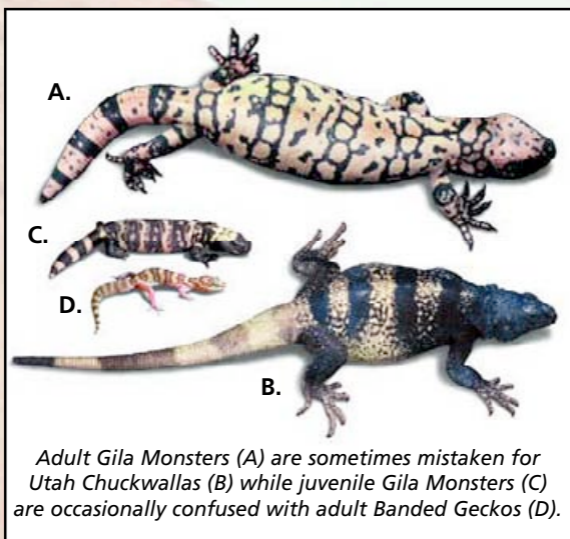
Some interesting facts about Gila Monsters.

- Gila Monsters and their relatives — the Beaded Lizards of Mexico and Guatemala — are the only venomous lizards in the world.
- Unlike most other lizards, Gila Monsters cannot run fast. Their painful venomous bite discourages potential predators.
- Pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly recently closed a \$325 million deal with Amylin Pharmaceuticals to market the new drug Exenatide, discovered from Gila Monster venom.
- Gila Monsters specialize on eating eggs (both reptiles and birds) and juvenile mammals from nests. They use energy very slowly; three large meals of juvenile cottontail rabbits may last a Gila Monster an entire year!
- In the spring, male Gila Monsters vie for access to females by performing spectacular wrestling matches that may last for several hours.
- Utah Gila Monsters prefer low-elevation desert along rocky bluffs and sandy canyons surrounding St. George. They spend over 95 percent of their time hidden in below-ground shelters.
- The Gila Monster is not a federally endangered species. However, Gila Monsters are protected by state and federal laws that prohibit collecting them from the wild.

- Gila Monster numbers in Utah are dwindling as their habitat gives way to housing and recreational development.
- Gila Monsters pose little threat to human health and safety. With knowledge and respect, humans and Gila Monsters can coexist.

How do I recognize a Gila Monster?

Gila Monsters are the largest lizard native to the United States weighing up to two pounds and reaching twenty inches in length, including a plump tail used for fat storage. Their salmon pink and black skin is embedded with tiny disks of bone, called osteoderms, giving the appearance and texture of fine bead work. Gila Monsters have large, bulky heads and bulges along their lower jaws, where the venom glands are housed.



Adult Gila Monsters (A) are sometimes mistaken for Utah Chuckwallas (B) while juvenile Gila Monsters (C) are occasionally confused with adult Banded Geckos (D).

Are Gila Monsters dangerous?

Gila Monster venom is lethal to small mammals such as mice, but no human deaths have been reported since the early 1930s when an intoxicated pool-hall operator allegedly died after poking his thumb into the mouth of a Gila Monster. With common sense, the risk to human safety is minimal.

When am I most likely to see a Gila Monster?

Around St. George, most people see Gila Monsters during the day in April and May, but activity may continue through June, July and August, especially on warm summer nights. Some of the best places to see Gila Monsters are in Snow Canyon State Park, designated trails in the Red Cliffs Reserve and the BLM Red Cliffs recreation area. Many new housing developments occur in good Gila Monster habitat, so don't be surprised if you see one in a residential area.

What should I do if I see a Gila Monster?

First, realize you are in no danger. Marvel at the beast; few people are fortunate enough to see a living Gila Monster in the wild! Do not approach too closely or you will likely put the Gila Monster in a defensive mode. Move slowly away and allow the lizard to continue. If you see a Gila Monster crossing a road, please avoid running over it.



If you see a Gila Monster in your yard or neighborhood, calmly alert others in the vicinity and restrain your pets (especially dogs). If left alone, the Gila Monster will likely move on within a couple of hours. If the Gila Monster does not leave, and you feel uncomfortable with the reptile in your vicinity, contact the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources at 435-879-8694. Bites to people are very rare and are almost always the result of harassment or careless handling.

What to do if a Gila Monster bite occurs:

- Remain calm.
- If necessary, remove the Gila Monster using a sturdy lever to pry open the jaws.
- Immediately transport bitten individual to a medical facility.
- Remove jewelry, watches and restrictive clothing from affected limb.

What NOT to do if a Gila Monster bite occurs:

- Do not apply ice to the bite area.
- Do not cut the skin or try to suck out venom.
- Do not use a constriction bandage or a tourniquet.
- Do not administer alcohol or drugs.

How can I protect children and pets from Gila Monsters?

When confronted with a human, Gila Monsters do their best to flee. Most Gila Monster bites reported to poison control centers are to dogs, the vast majority of which recover without major complications. Responsible pet owners should restrain pets in desert habitats.

“Watch your step” applies to Gila monsters. Never put your hand or foot where you cannot see. Because of their natural curiosity, small children may be vulnerable to a Gila Monster bite. Parents should not allow children to play unattended in the desert.

The best protection is to educate ourselves about the desert and its amazing inhabitants. Teach children not to pick up Gila Monsters just as you would teach them to avoid other potentially dangerous objects like matches, knives and medicines. Just as we take precautions in the home to safeguard our family, so too should we seek to understand the risks — and benefits — of our native wildlife. Their presence affirms that we live in an incredible place.

REMEMBER, IT IS DANGEROUS, UNWISE AND ILLEGAL TO PICK UP, CARRY OR COLLECT A GILA MONSTER FROM THE WILD.

If you see a gila monster in Utah, please report the time and location to the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources at 435-879-8694 or wildlife.utah.gov

In an emergency, call the Poaching Hotline at 1-800-662-DEER.

Learn about Gila Monsters and other native reptiles and amphibians from:

The Peterson Field Guide to Western Reptiles and Amphibians by R. C. Stebbins, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston. 2003.

Biology of Gila Monsters and Beaded Lizards by D. D. Beck. Book forthcoming from the University of California Press in 2005.

Gila Monster—Facts and Folklore of America's Aztec Lizard by D. E. Brown and N. B. Carmony, High Lonesome Books, Silver City New Mexico. 1991.

The Venomous Reptiles of Arizona by C. H. Lowe, C. R. Schwalbe and T. B. Johnson, Arizona Game and Fish Dept., Phoenix, Arizona. 1986.

This brochure was developed in partnership with:



Utah Division of Wildlife Resources



CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Your future is Central.

Text by Daniel Beck.

Photographs: Copyright Thomas Wiewandt 2004
www.wildhorizons.com

