

**THE BEADED LIZARD (*HELODERMA HORRIDUM*)
AND GILA MONSTER (*HELODERMA SUSPECTUM*):
A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE FAMILY HELODERMATIDAE**



KENT R. BEAMAN¹, DANIEL D. BECK² & BRIAN M. MCGURTY³

¹Ichthyology and Herpetology
Natural History Museum Los Angeles

²Department of Biological Sciences
Central Washington University

³Diamond Bar, California

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The cover illustration of a Gila Monster (*Heloderma suspectum*) is from Baird (1859).

INTRODUCTION

This bibliography is a compilation of references on the venomous lizards of the family Helodermatidae, the beaded lizard (*Heloderma horridum*) and Gila monster (*Heloderma suspectum*). Like all venomous reptiles, the Helodermatidae have long been shrouded in mystery, misinformation, and myth. This mystique is even reflected in their specific epithets: *horridum* (the horrible one) and *suspectum* (the suspect). In 1869, E.D. Cope chose the epithet “suspectum” for the Gila monster because he “suspected” it was venomous but it took the scientific community nearly another half century to agree that, indeed this was true. Unlike most other lizards, helodermatids cannot run swiftly. A painful venomous bite is an important feature of their ability to avoid predators. For us humans, the venom of helodermatid lizards is proving to be a surprising source of pharmacologically active peptides, some of which hold great promise for treating disease, such as diabetes.

Other discoveries within this bibliography reveal that the two remaining species of helodermatid lizards are relicts of a more diverse lineage (the Monstersauria) that includes at least seven other genera (*Estesia*, *Eurheloderma*, *Gobiderma*, *Lowesaurus*, *Palaeosaniwa*, *Paraderma*, and *Primaderma*) inhabiting arid, temperate, and subtropical regions across Europe, Asia, and North America. The Monstersauria (Helodermatidae) has been traced back nearly 100 million years, and has somehow managed to survive the great Cretaceous extinctions, which vanquished the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. The genus *Heloderma* has existed since at least the early Miocene (about 23 million years ago) and has undergone relatively little gross morphological change over this time, prompting paleontologists to dub it a living fossil.

The references in this bibliography also tell a story of sedentary nest predators that return year after year to the same foraging areas and shelters. Males vie for access to females by performing spectacular combat rituals, reminiscent of the entwining combat dances of viperid snakes. Their low metabolic rates, ability to eat large meals, and to store energy as fat in their sausage-shaped tails enable helodermatid lizards to offset the energy costs of searching for a widely distributed food source and to subsist long periods without feeding. These traits make frequent foraging unnecessary and contribute to their ability to feed almost solely on the contents of vertebrate eggs and young in their nests, a specialized feeding niche shown by few other lizards. The ecology, physiology and behavior of the Helodermatidae has helped us refine our thinking about reptilian life in the slow lane, and as ancient members of the clade from which snakes likely arose, they are putting a new spin on what it means to be a lizard.

Papers in this bibliography are also sounding an early warning. Throughout most of their range, helodermatid lizards inhabit only a fraction of what was once suitable habitat. During the last 150 years, thousands of square miles of desert and tropical dry forest habitats have been cleared for agriculture, residential, and recreational development. Although helodermatid lizards are not in immediate danger of extinction, some populations are in peril, especially along the margins of their geographic range. *Heloderma* affords us an opportunity for a proactive approach in conserving biodiversity. It will be far more difficult for *Heloderma* populations to recover, if they can recover at all, if we wait until they are on the endangered species list before we take action to preserve their spectacular habitats. As interest in this fascinating family of lizards continues to grow, so will the list of references included here. We still have much to learn about helodermatid lizards and what lies ahead could be even more interesting than what we've already discovered, but only if we act responsibly to ensure their survival.

This bibliography provides the essential references for the family Helodermatidae. Both technical and popular articles dealing with new information or synthesis of previous knowledge are included. It was assembled from a variety of sources, including Biological Abstracts, Zoological Record, Synopsis of the

Herpetofauna of Mexico, Volumes II-VII, and Wildlife Review. Bogert and Martín del Campo (1956) was an important reference for pre-1900 literature. The numerical index is cross-referenced to the number of each citation. Various Internet links provide additional unverified information on *Heloderma* that are not included in this bibliography.

The following individuals contributed to the compilation of this bibliography. I. Horovitz, A. Olivas, N. Ruiz-Lawson, H. Schwarz, and L. Turner assisted with foreign translations. T. Moisi, N. Moorhatch and M. Wilcox assisted with citations from the popular literature, S. Goldberg provided reprints on parasitology, L. Coates of the Zoological Society of San Diego Library assisted with zoo publications and K. Adler, B. Bartholomew, A. Bauer, D. Hardy, Sr., M. Patterson, H. Smith, and M. Sredl assisted with obscure literature citations. M. Griffen and D. McNamee helped with interlibrary loans and made it possible to search Zoological Record more efficiently.

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