

WILD NEVADA

Gila monster has been highly overrated as the killer lizard

By Sheldon Dingle

Of the 3,000 or so kinds of lizards in the world, only two are poisonous. The banded Gila monster (*Heloderma suspectum cinctum*) lives in parts of the deserts of the southwestern United States and adjacent Mexico. Its relative, the beaded lizard (*Heloderma horridum*) lives along the western edge of Mexico.

Although these lizards are poisonous, their venom apparatus is rather inefficient. The venom glands are located in the lower jaw. When something is bitten, the venom flows along a groove between the gums and lip, then to a groove in the teeth, and finally into the wound of the bitten subject. For this slow procedure to work, the lizard must bite, hang on, and even chew a little to enlarge the wound

while waiting for the poison to arrive.

The poison is an anevrotoxin that causes swelling, loss of consciousness, vomiting, palpitations, labored breathing, dizziness, and swollen tongue and glands — although not all of these symptoms occur in all victims.

A 1959 study found only 34 known cases of Gila monster bites, eight of which proved fatal. The fatalities all involved people already in ill health or drunk individuals who didn't even realize they were suffering multiple bites.

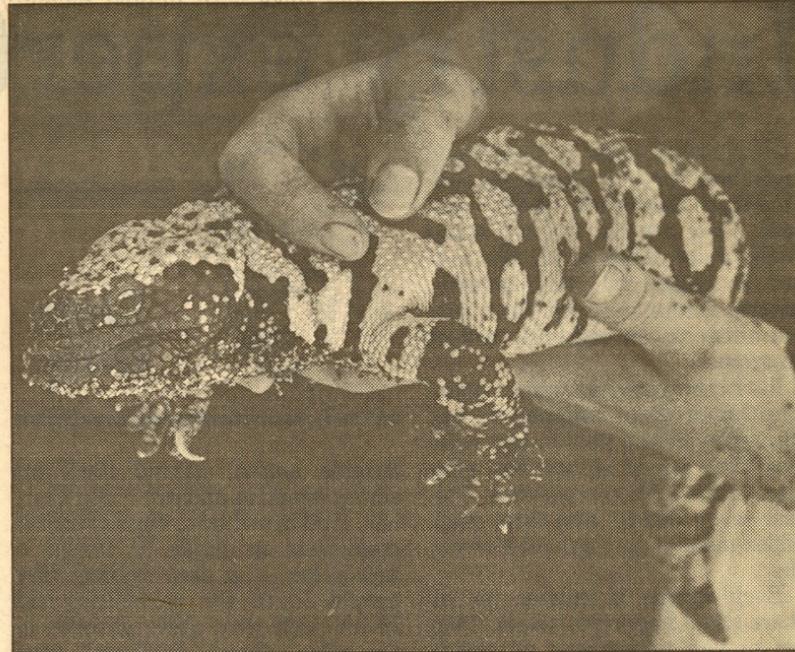
One advantage the Gila monster has is that it can live a long time without much to eat. These lizards store great amounts of surplus fat in their tails and bodies. One specimen is known to have lived three years without food. It was skinny when taken into captivity, but was fat again within six months.

The Gila monster is very rare in southern Nevada. One estimate is

that there is only one per 500 square miles. They are a species protected by the state of Nevada and are not available to the general public without a difficult-to-obtain permit from the Nevada Department of Wildlife. They are on display in two Southern Nevada collections — at the UNLV Museum of Natural History and the Southern Nevada Zoological Park.

My brother, Pat Dingle, director of the Southern Nevada Zoological Park, has scoured the deserts since 1962 but has never seen a Gila monster in the wild. Every spring the zoo receives dozens of phone calls from concerned citizens who believe they have discovered baby Gila monsters in their yard. Invariably when the animals are brought in, they are young banded geckos, a perfectly harmless species with similar patterns.

However, there have been Gila monsters found in the area where



Ralph Fountain

The banded Gila monster lives in parts of the Southwest.

Summerlin is now building, as well as various scattered spots throughout the valley. So keep your eyes open: You may find that one in a 500-square-mile area.

Sheldon Dingle is a staff wildlife writer for the Southern Nevada Zoological Park.