



# BIOLOGY OF THE REPTILIA



# BIOLOGY OF THE REPTILIA

*Edited by*

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*The University of Michigan,  
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*Coeditor for this volume*

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## Preface

The area of physiological ecology represents a new development and one of the success stories of the last 25 years. Not only is it a new area, but the physiological ecology of reptiles, rather than following patterns set by studies on other groups, was fundamental in founding the area and has since included the key developments in the field. For this reason it was obvious from the beginning that physiological ecology needed to be included within the framework of the *Biology of the Reptilia* and I am delighted to have had the energetic assistance of Dr. F. Harvey Pough in assembling and editing these volumes.

Inevitably the topic includes more than can be provided here. For that matter, our knowledge of some areas of the field can be seen still to be in the anecdotal stage. Nevertheless, we have desisted from including treatment only of the most mature areas; clearly a statement that there are many potentially interesting aspects for which we as yet lack quantitative analyses may serve as a stimulus and a guide to future work.

On the other hand there are some areas, notably the utilization of thermal and water resources about which we not only have an enormous amount of literature but also some level of disagreement on how to proceed or interpret the data. Consequently, we have chosen to reflect this by selecting authors whose work is characterized by particular viewpoints and approaches to the topic.

It is my pleasure to thank Mr. Dennis M. Harris and Dr. George A. Zug for their painstaking reading of the manuscripts and proofs and for assisting us in making sure that the nomenclature was as uniform and as up to date as possible. We also are in the debt of many colleagues who read individual manuscripts of this set and shared their views as well as special insights, and provided aid with references to published and unpublished work. Beyond those acknowledged in the individual chapters it is a pleasure to acknowledge R. M. Andrews, R. A. Avery, G. A. Bartholomew, C. A. Beuchat, C. M. Bogert, S. D. Bradshaw, W. H. Dantzler, C. O. da C. Diefenbach, D. Duvall, W. A. Dunson, L. D. Garrick, P. T. Gregory, J. E. Heath, H. Heatwole, R. B. Huey, V. H. Hutchison, L. O. Larsen, H. B. Lillywhite, R. A. Marlow, W. J. Mautz, J. E. Minnich, K. A. Nagy, E. R. Pianka, W. P. Porter, H. Rahn, R. Ruibal, H. Saint Girons, R. S. Seymour, V. H.

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Carl Gans

## Contents

Contributors to Volume 12	.. .. .	v
Preface	.. .. .	vii
<b>1. Physiological Ecology: Its Debt to Reptilian Studies, Its Value to Students of Reptiles</b>		
✓ Carl Gans and F. H. Pough		
I. Introduction	.. .. .	1
II. Why Studies of Reptiles Led the Way	.. .. .	2
III. Ecological Consequences of Reptilian Physiology	.. .. .	5
IV. How to Define Reptiles	.. .. .	8
V. Summary	.. .. .	10
Acknowledgements	.. .. .	11
References	.. .. .	11

## Part I

### Temperature Regulation and Thermal Relations

<b>2. The Vocabulary of Reptilian Thermoregulation</b>		
F. H. Pough and Carl Gans		
I. Introduction	.. .. .	17
II. Glossary	.. .. .	18
Acknowledgements	.. .. .	23
References	.. .. .	23
<b>3. Temperature, Physiology, and the Ecology of Reptiles</b>		
Raymond B. Huey		
I. Introduction	.. .. .	25
A. Historical Views on Temperature and Reptilian Ecology	.. .. .	25
B. Variables in the Thermal Ecology of Reptiles	.. .. .	26
II. Physiological Aspects of Thermal Ecology	.. .. .	28



A. Physiological Processes Relevant to Ecology .. ..	28
B. Types of Physiological Parameters .. ..	29
C. Methods of Estimating Performance Parameters ..	36
D. Multiple Physiological Optimal Temperatures—Do They Exist? .. .. .	40
E. Analytical Problems .. .. .	44
III. Ecological Context of Temperature Regulation .. ..	45
A. Introduction .. .. .	45
B. Toward an Ecological Definition of Temperature Regulation .. .. .	47
C. Estimating the Extent of Temperature Regulation ..	48
D. Costs and Risks of Temperature Regulation .. ..	50
IV. General Aspects of Thermal Ecology .. .. .	58
A. Time of Activity .. .. .	58
B. Activity versus Inactivity .. .. .	61
C. Temperature and Sex Determination .. .. .	66
D. Thermal Specialists and Generalists .. .. .	68
E. Rate of Evolution of Thermal Sensitivity .. ..	70
V. Concluding Remarks .. .. .	73
Acknowledgements .. .. .	73
References .. .. .	74

#### 4. Field Studies of Body Temperatures and Thermoregulation

✓ R. A. Avery

I. Introduction .. .. .	93
II. Methods .. .. .	93
III. Interpretation of Body Temperatures Measured in the Field .. .. .	96
IV. Activity Temperatures .. .. .	98
A. General Considerations .. .. .	98
B. Lizards .. .. .	99
C. Amphisbaenians .. .. .	125
✓ D. Snakes .. .. .	125
E. <i>Sphenodon</i> .. .. .	134
F. Crocodilians .. .. .	135
G. Testudines .. .. .	136
V. Discussion .. .. .	141
Acknowledgements .. .. .	146
References .. .. .	146

## 5. Physiological Control of Body Temperature

George A. Bartholomew

I. Introduction .. .. .	167
II. Mechanisms Available for Control of Body Temperature	168
A. Temperature Control versus Temperature Regulation	168
B. Birds and Mammals .. .. .	168
C. Reptiles .. .. .	170
III. Historical Considerations .. .. .	171
IV. Lizards .. .. .	173
A. Introduction .. .. .	173
B. Physiological Control of Rate of Change in Body Temperature .. .. .	174
C. Physiological Factors Affecting Changes in Body Temperature .. .. .	176
V. Crocodilians .. .. .	185
A. Introduction .. .. .	185
B. Physiological Modulation of Rates of Change in Body Temperature .. .. .	186
C. Physiological Factors Affecting Rates of Heating and Cooling .. .. .	186
D. Regional Heterothermy .. .. .	187
E. Effects of Gaping .. .. .	188
F. Endogenous Heat Production .. .. .	189
G. Other Factors .. .. .	189
VI. Turtles .. .. .	190
A. Introduction .. .. .	190
B. Physiological Control of Rates of Change in Body Temperature .. .. .	190
C. Physiological Factors Affecting Rates of Heating and Cooling .. .. .	191
D. Regional Heterothermy .. .. .	192
E. Evaporative Cooling .. .. .	193
F. Temperature Sensors .. .. .	194
G. Endothermic Heat Production .. .. .	194
VII. <i>Sphenodon</i> .. .. .	197
VIII. Snakes .. .. .	197
A. Introduction .. .. .	197
B. Physiological Control of Rates of Changes in Body Temperature .. .. .	198
C. Physiological Factors Affecting Body Temperature	198

IX. The Functional and Ecological Role of Physiological Control of Body Temperature in Reptiles .. ..	202
References .. .. .	204
<b>6. Sensory, Neural and Hormonal Aspects of Thermoregulation</b>	
Bruce J. Firth and J. Scott Turner	
I. Introduction .. .. .	213
II. Behavioral Thermoregulation .. .. .	214
A. The Neural Basis of Behavioral Thermoregulation ..	214
B. Integration of Behavioral Thermoregulation with Environment .. .. .	222
C. Miscellaneous Influences on Behavioral Thermoregulation .. .. .	228
D. Summary .. .. .	231
III. Thermal Adaptation .. .. .	232
A. General .. .. .	232
B. Thermal Acclimation .. .. .	233
C. Cardiovascular Adaptations .. .. .	236
D. Water Balance .. .. .	252
IV. Hibernation .. .. .	254
A. General .. .. .	254
B. Hibernation and the Brain .. .. .	255
C. Endocrine Involvement .. .. .	257
V. Conclusions and Summary .. .. .	258
Acknowledgements .. .. .	259
References .. .. .	259
<b>7. Biophysical Modeling in Reptilian Physiology and Ecology</b>	
C. Richard Tracy	
I. Introduction .. .. .	275
II. Equations Describing Biophysical Interactions .. ..	277
A. Introductory Comments .. .. .	277
B. Energy Budgets .. .. .	278
C. Water Budgets .. .. .	286
III. Representation of the Physical Environment .. ..	291
A. Introductory Comments .. .. .	291
B. Climate Space .. .. .	292
C. Contour Plots .. .. .	293
D. Operative Temperatures .. .. .	294
E. Problems of Representing the Physical Environment	295

IV. Biophysical Analyses .. .. .	295
A. Introductory Remarks .. .. .	295
B. The Importance of Internal Heat Transfer .. .. .	296
C. Time and Space Utilization .. .. .	300
D. Hydric Adaptations of Reptilian Eggs .. .. .	303
V. Concluding Remarks .. .. .	307
Acknowledgements .. .. .	308
References .. .. .	308
Appendices A-E .. .. .	315

## Part 2

### Water Relations

#### 8. The Use of Water

John E. Minnich

I. Introduction .. .. .	325
II. Regulation of Body Fluids .. .. .	326
A. Introduction .. .. .	326
B. Plasma Solutes .. .. .	326
C. Tissue Solutes .. .. .	333
D. Body Fluid Volumes .. .. .	336
E. Effects of Hydration State .. .. .	341
F. Water Storage .. .. .	349
G. Effects of Temperature on Body Fluids .. .. .	350
III. Water Fluxes .. .. .	353
A. Acquisition of Water .. .. .	353
B. Regulation of Water Losses .. .. .	362
IV. Conclusions .. .. .	385
Acknowledgements .. .. .	386
References .. .. .	386

#### 9. Skin Structure and Permeability

H. B. Lillywhite and P. F. A. Maderson

I. Introduction .. .. .	397
II. Historical Background .. .. .	397
III. Theoretical Aspects .. .. .	399
IV. The Basic Morphology of the Reptilian Integument .. .. .	401
A. Introduction .. .. .	401
B. The Differential Distribution of Types of Keratin within the Epidermis .. .. .	401

C.	The Shedding Cycle and Temporal-Spatial Complexity of the Squamate Epidermis	..	..	404
V.	Integumentary Structure and Permeability	..	..	405
A.	Introduction	..	..	405
B.	Some Considerations of Scale Form	..	..	405
C.	The Functional Significance of the Horizontal Distribution of Epidermal Keratins	..	..	408
D.	The Significance of the Vertical Distribution of Keratins	..	..	409
E.	Cutaneous Water Loss and the Shedding Cycle	..	..	412
VI.	Chemical Aspects and a Derived Interpretation of the Barrier to Water Movement in Squamate Epidermis	..	..	414
A.	Introduction	..	..	414
B.	Epidermal Lipids and the Mesos Barrier	..	..	415
C.	Permeability and the Hydration of Epidermis	..	..	422
D.	Other Barriers	..	..	423
VII.	Aquatic Reptiles and Integumentary Permeability to Water, Ions and Gases	..	..	424
VIII.	Regulation of Permeability: Some Comments and Predictions	..	..	430
IX.	Concluding Remarks	..	..	433
	Acknowledgements	..	..	435
	References	..	..	435

## 10. Patterns of Evaporative Water Loss

William J. Mautz

I.	Introduction	..	..	443
II.	Experimental Approaches	..	..	444
III.	Theoretical Considerations	..	..	446
A.	Respiratory Water Loss	..	..	446
B.	Cutaneous Water Loss	..	..	449
C.	Ocular Water Loss	..	..	453
D.	Dimensions and Allometry	..	..	454
IV.	Ecological Correlates of Evaporative Water Loss	..	..	457
A.	Climate	..	..	457
B.	Microclimate	..	..	467
C.	Evolution	..	..	468
V.	Conclusions	..	..	472
	Acknowledgements	..	..	476
	References	..	..	477

**11. Field Studies of Water Relations**

Kenneth A. Nagy

I. Introduction .. .. .	483
II. Methodology .. .. .	484
A. Isotopically Labeled Water .. .. .	484
B. Other Field Measurements .. .. .	487
III. Water Fluxes in Free-living Reptiles .. .. .	487
A. Allometric Analyses .. .. .	487
B. Comparison with Mammals and Birds .. .. .	493
IV. Field Water Budgets .. .. .	495
V. Summary and Conclusions .. .. .	497
Acknowledgements .. .. .	499
References .. .. .	499
Author Index .. .. .	503
Subject Index .. .. .	523

## CHAPTER 1

# Physiological Ecology: Its Debt to Reptilian Studies, Its Value to Students of Reptiles

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## I. Introduction

The traditional approach of comparative biologists to the study of reptiles was motivated by the desire to fill gaps in our knowledge. Unfortunately, the initially greater amount of information about the physiology of amphibians and mammals suggested that reptiles be viewed as showing conditions of structure, behavior or physiology that were by definition "transitional" between those seen in amphibians and fishes on the one hand and those seen in mammals and birds on the other. One of the important advances in vertebrate biology during the twentieth century has been the growing realization that this evolutionary stepping stone concept of Recent classes is inappropriate. Instead, each grade of tetrapods appears to represent a distinctive approach to terrestrial life.\* The study of the physiological ecology of animals specifically addresses several major aspects of these distinct approaches and the physiological ecology of reptiles has proved to be an especially fruitful field. Consequently, concepts and techniques deriving from reptilian studies have been extended and applied in the study of other organisms. Not only this, but reptiles continue to present the clearest and best documented examples of many topics in physiological ecology.

What, then, is physiological ecology and why has it been historically so

\*Here we explicitly deal with Recent reptiles. Inference about the physiology or physiological ecology of extinct reptiles is beyond the scope of this series, although such inference must draw heavily on observations of Recent reptiles.

closely associated with the study of reptiles? Physiological ecology may best be viewed as a philosophical approach to the study of organismic adaptation and diversity rather than as a specific paradigm. Consequently, it can be distinguished from the older disciplines, not so much by the measurements it makes as by the context in which it phrases its questions. Physiological ecologists ask how organisms deal with aspects of their environments, but do not restrict themselves to the artificial divisions among levels of biological organization that are unfortunately necessary for some teaching and for much research in biology. For these reasons, physiological ecology differs fundamentally from general and comparative physiology. General physiology presumably deals with major principles, such as Starling's Law of the Heart. These principles are assumed to have broad application but, above all, they are pertinent to mammals. Comparative physiology, in contrast, asks how one process, be it oxygen transport or electroreception, is handled by diverse organisms, by fishes and by humans, by amoebae and octopuses. It also asks how it is handled in diverse environments in forests and marine situations, in deserts and the arctic.

Physiological ecology extends experiments and interpretation farther into the realm of environmental analysis. In asking how organisms deal with their environment, physiological ecology measures the same structures and processes that are the traditional subject of physiological study. However, it also draws heavily upon ecology and evolutionary biology. These are fields in which definitions are subject to debate, precise quantification is difficult or impossible, and confidence that a phenomenon is understood may last only one seasonal cycle. Repeated experience with the pitfalls of explaining and predicting has led physiological ecologists to appreciate the endless diversity of natural systems. It has also engendered an unwillingness to limit explanations to the "either/or" dichotomies that underlie the methodology of traditional experimental science. In practice, physiological ecology should avoid dividing animals into morphological, behavioral, physiological, and ecological compartments. Function, not phylogeny, forms the basis for primary comparisons in physiological ecology.

## II. Why Studies of Reptiles Led the Way

In retrospect, it is obvious that the abundance of lizards in desert habitats and the conspicuousness of their thermoregulatory behavior provided the milieu for early studies of the dynamic interchange between animals and their physical environments. Physiology moved out of the laboratory when field-oriented biologists noted that reptiles in the wild (a) were not "cold-blooded" and (b) did not conform to the paradigms developed by such classical physiologists as F. G. Benedict (1932) on animals restrained in



the laboratory. That is, the body temperature of freely moving reptiles was not equal to the temperature of the air surrounding them; nor did the body temperatures of such reptiles necessarily track the fluctuations of environmental temperature. The surprising part of this discovery was that lizards regulate their body temperature within narrow limits by means of a complex suite of mechanisms that range from movement to color change. These observations were made, apparently simultaneously, by workers in the deserts of central Asia (Sergeyev, 1939) and of North America (Bogert, 1939; Cowles, 1939). Once students started measuring actual body temperatures and comparing them with the daily temperature extremes of these deserts, it became obvious that the local reptiles did not conform.

For a time, the discovery that the activity temperatures of most species of reptiles were species-specific and differed from those of other species (Cowles and Bogert, 1944), coupled with the observation that such temperatures could be easily measured, led to ever-expanding numbers of lizard watchers. (These workers, noose-bearing fishing pole in one hand and Schultheis thermometer in the other, were later referred to as the "noose 'em and goose 'em" school.) Other investigators began to study mechanisms of thermoregulation, examining for instance the effect of changing integumentary absorptivity, capillary shunts, and the influence of such integumentary modifications as feathers and hair (Cowles, 1958, clothed some lizards in fur coats). The facile explanation that every observed temperature resulted from thermoregulation was soon called into question; witness the demonstration (Heath, 1964) that by some criteria then in use, even beer cans appeared to thermoregulate.

Students began to document the complexity of behavioral thermoregulatory mechanisms; these involved not only shuttling between thermal source and thermal sink, but also diverse postural adjustments (Heath, 1965; Muth, 1977). Whole cycles of studies dealt with the establishment of set points or control limits for the different behaviors (Bartholomew, this volume). An extension of field studies to mountains and subtropical habitats showed that the body temperatures maintained during activity by congeneric species of lizards are quite similar even in widely different habitats, whereas unrelated species of lizards have very different body temperatures when both live in the same habitat (Bogert, 1949a, 1949b, 1981; Brattstrom, 1965). In the half century since these pioneering studies of reptilian thermoregulation, a full cycle has been completed; reptiles that do not thermoregulate are now subjects of great interest (Avery and Huey, this volume).

The terminology of thermoregulation used by comparative physiologists in the 1940s could not accommodate the complications introduced by the