

# Invasive 'giant' reptile lurks under Georgia porch, officials say: Here's why it is dangerous

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Credit: Gabriel Moreno from Pexels

A Georgia homeowner was in for a shock when she found a 3-foot reptile living under her house, wildlife officials say.

A woman living in Athens discovered there was an Argentine black and white tegu staked out under her porch in September, according to an Oct. 31 Georgia Department of Natural Resources news release. Now

the department is urging people to both keep an eye out for the [invasive species](#), as well as register their pet reptiles before an upcoming state deadline.

An Argentine black and white tegu is a popular large lizard in the [pet trade](#), according to the department. After years of the lizards escaping or owners releasing them, tegus have established [wild populations](#) in Florida and southeast Georgia.

The tegu on the loose in Athens roamed outside the woman's house, the department said. She was unaware of it until children in her neighborhood told her they saw a "[giant lizard](#)" hanging out in her yard, according to the release.

The omnivorous lizard was eventually trapped and turned in to the state's natural resources department, the release said, but no one claimed ownership. The department isn't sure if the tegu was released into the wild, which is illegal in Georgia, the department said.

"This is definitely an example of why we need to regulate these [species](#)," the department's wildlife conservation assistant chief Brett Albanese said in the release. "They can be difficult to keep and as they grow their owners may not want to care for them or be able to afford to."

## **Why tegus can be harmful to Georgia wildlife**

Tegus have a voracious appetite—particularly for all kinds of native animals.

Tegus consume a variety of eggs, including from quails, turkeys and other birds who lay their eggs in ground nests, according to the department's website. They also prey on eggs from American alligators and gopher tortoises, which are protected species..

The department warns that the lizard also devours "fruit, vegetables, plants, pet food, carrion and small live animals."

The big lizard—which grows up to 4 feet long and weighs up to 10 pounds—could spread "exotic parasites" to Georgia wildlife as well, the department said. Contamination of crops is another concern, the department said, because of its ability to spread salmonella like most other reptiles.

## **How to register newly listed pet reptiles in Georgia**

To reduce the invasive lizard species' spread, tagging and registering pet tegus, as well as some other reptiles, is mandatory. Owners of certain reptiles in Georgia are required to tag their pets with "a passive integrated transponder tag" and register the animal with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, according to the release.

The deadline for tagging and registering six "newly regulated [reptile species](#)" is Dec. 3, wildlife officials said. Those species added to the required pet registration list are:

- Argentine black and white tegus
- Nile monitors
- African helmeted turtles
- Chinese softshell turtles
- Indian rock and Burmese pythons

The species were added to the list after assessments by state biologists determined the reptiles "pose a threat to [wildlife](#) or people," according to the department.

After the deadline, the only reasons one of the reptiles on the list can be owned are for "scientific, educational or public exhibition purposes," the

department said.

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