



NEVADA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE SOUTHERN REGION

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GILA MONSTER STATUS, IDENTIFICATION AND REPORTING PROTOCOL FOR OBSERVATIONS

Status

- The **Gila monster** (*Heloderma suspectum*) is secretive, difficult to detect, and seemingly rare relative to other species. These attributes led the **State of Nevada** decades ago to classify the species as **Protected** (Nevada Administrative Code 503.080). Their populations are also vulnerable to poaching, the cumulative effects of habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation, and climate changes (Wildlife Action Plan Team 2012).
- Therefore, a person shall not hunt or take any protected wildlife, or possess any part thereof, without first obtaining the appropriate license, permit or written authorization from the Nevada Department of Wildlife (Nevada Administrative Codes 503.090 and 503.093).
- The USDI Bureau of Land Management has recognized this lizard as a sensitive species since 1978 and is to manage public lands in a manner to avoid the necessity of higher federal protections (BLM Manual 6840 – Special Status Species).
- In Clark County’s Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSHCP), the Gila monster is an *Evaluation Species*, meaning inadequate information exists to determine if mitigation from MSHCP implementation would demonstrably cover conservation actions necessary to ensure its persistence without additional protective intervention as provided under the federal Endangered Species Act.
- While the Gila monster is the only venomous lizard endemic to the United States, its behavioral disposition is somewhat docile and avoids confrontation. But it will readily defend itself if threatened. Most bites are considered *illegitimate*, not caused by Gila monster aggression, but resulting from human harassment or careless handling. Gila monsters are not dangerous unless molested or inappropriately handled and should never be harmed or killed.
- The Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) has ongoing management studies for greatly improving our understanding specific to Nevada’s banded Gila monster populations; hence, **additional sightings and descriptions for this species distribution, habitat, and biological information is of utmost interest.**
- In assistance to gathering additional information about Nevada’s Gila monsters, **NDOW will be notified whenever a Gila monster is encountered or observed,** and under what circumstances (see Reporting Protocol below).

Identification

The banded Gila monster (*H. s. cinctum*) is the only wild subspecies occurring in Nevada, and is restricted to Clark, Lincoln, and Nye counties. Found mainly below 5,000 feet elevation, its geographic range approximates that of the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) in Nevada. Gila monster habitat requirements center on complex rocky landscapes of upland desert scrub overlapping desert wash, spring, and riparian habitats, often characteristic of alluvial fans (bajadas) and adjacent rocky fields. Gila monster habitat overlaps that of both the desert tortoise and chuckwalla (*Sauromalus ater*).



Gila monsters are recognizable by a striking black and orange-pink coloration and bumpy, or beaded, skin. In keeping with its name, the banded Gila monster (shown left) retains a black chain-link, banded pattern into adulthood. Sometimes other non-venomous lizards are mistaken for the Gila monster. Of these, the western banded gecko (*Coleonyx variegatus*) and the chuckwalla are the most frequent. All three share similar habitats.

To untrained eyes, the color pattern and finely granular skin of the western banded gecko (right) may have the looks of a baby or juvenile Gila monster. But gecko heads are more pointed at the snout and the relatively large eyes have *vertical* pupils befitting their nighttime habits. Gila monsters may be both nocturnal and diurnal; the smallish eyes have *round* pupils. Snouts are bluntly rounded. Newly hatched Gila monsters vary in length at 5-7 inches with a vivid orange and black, banded pattern. Western banded geckos are generally smaller than 4 inches with cream to yellow background colors and brown to purple banded patterns.



Chuckwalla adults (left) and juveniles have a body shape somewhat suggestive of the Gila monster, but they lack the coarsely beaded skin and showy black and orange-pink body pattern. While juvenile chuckwallas can have orange and black banded tails, this colorful banding fades as chuckwallas mature. From nose to tail tip, adult chuckwallas may reach 17 inches long, rivaling that of the Gila monster. Chuckwallas are herbivorous. When alarmed, they are fast movers seeking cracks and crevices into which they can wedge themselves by inflating their bodies with air. Chuckwallas are diurnal and rock dwellers.

Reporting Protocol

Field workers (e.g. construction foremen, bio-monitors) must at least know how to: (1) identify a Gila monster by distinguishing it from other lizards like the chuckwalla and western banded gecko (see **Identification** above); (2) Report any Gila monster observation to the NDOW; (3) Be aware of the consequences of a Gila monster bite resulting from carelessness or unnecessary harassment; and, (4) Be advised of protective measures provided under state law and federal management policies.

- 1) Live Gila monsters found in harm's way in the construction site will be captured and then detained by the project biologist or equivalent personnel in a cool ($\leq 85^{\circ}\text{F}$), shaded environment (air-conditioned vehicle or trailer is okay) until a NDOW biologist can arrive for biological documentation prior to its release. Although a Gila monster is venomous and can inflict a serious bite, its relatively slow gait allows for it to be easily coaxed or carefully lifted into an open bucket or box using a long handled instrument like a snake hook, tongs, or shovel (*Note: it is not the intent to request unreasonable action to facilitate captures; additional coordination with NDOW will clarify logistical points*). For safe detainment, an unused or sterile 5-gallon plastic bucket with a secure, vented lid; an 18"x18"x4" plastic sweater box having a secure, vented lid; or, a tape-sealed cardboard box of similar dimension may be used. And, written information identifying the mapped capture location, Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates in Universal Transverse Mercator (UTM) using North American Datum (NAD) 83 Zone 11 along with date, time, and circumstances (e.g. biological survey, construction monitoring) and habitat description (e.g. vegetation, slope, aspect, substrate) will also be provided to NDOW.
- 2) Injuries to Gila monsters may occur during excavation, blasting, road grading, or other construction activities. In the event a Gila monster is injured, it should be transferred to a veterinarian proficient in reptile medicine for evaluation of appropriate treatment. Therapy or euthanasia expenses will not be covered by NDOW. However, NDOW will be immediately notified of any injury to a Gila monster and which veterinarian is providing care for the animal. If an animal is killed or found dead, the carcass will be immediately frozen and transferred to NDOW with a complete written description of the discovery and circumstances, date, time, habitat, and mapped location (GPS coordinates in UTM using NAD 83 Z 11).
- 3) Should NDOW's assistance be delayed, biological or equivalent acting personnel on site should detain the Gila monster out of harms way until NDOW personnel can respond. **The Gila monster should be detained until NDOW biologists have responded.** Should NDOW not be immediately available to respond for photo-documentation, a digital camera (≥ 5 mega-pixels) will be used to take good quality images of the Gila monster *in situ* at the location of live encounter or dead salvage. The pictures will be provided to NDOW at the address above or the email address below along with specific location information including GPS coordinates in UTM using NAD 83 Z 11, date, time and habitat description. Pictures will show the following information: (1) Encounter location (landscape with Gila monster in clear view); (2) a clear overhead shot of the entire body with a ruler next to it for scale (Gila monster should fill camera's field of view and be in sharp focus); and, (3) a clear, overhead close-up of the head (head should fill camera's field of view and in sharp focus).

Please Remember: Gila monsters are considered sensitive species and sharing of observation information to sources outside of NDOW or other permitting agencies may result in adverse conservation or administrative consequences.

Contact NDOW Biologist Matt Flores at 702.668.3936 (office), 702-290-5262 (cell; leave message or text), 702.486.5127 (front desk) or by e-mail at mhflores@ndow.org for additional information regarding these protocols.