



# NEWS RELEASE

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## ZOO'S FIRST VENOMOUS LIZARDS

NORFOLK, Va. – Two beaded lizards are now receiving visitors in the Virginia Zoo's exhibit building.

"They are the first venomous lizards we've had on exhibit here that we know of," said Craig Pelke, the Zoo's curator of birds and ectotherms. The lizards went on exhibit in mid September.

Beaded lizards are mostly found in southern Guatemala and Mexico. Threatened throughout their range by over collection and habitat loss, beaded lizards are a protected species.

The beaded lizard and its more familiar cousin, the Gila monster, are the only lizards that have evolved an overt venom delivery system. The beaded lizard, which grows to two or three feet in length, is larger than the Gila monster and has duller coloration. They are black and marked with varying yellow bands.

Beaded lizards have a long tail used to store fat, so the animal can survive during months of aestivation, a state of dormancy entered into in response to high temperatures. Like many reptiles, the beaded lizard has a forked tongue, which it uses to smell. Feeding primarily on bird and reptile eggs, they will occasionally prey upon small birds, mammals, frogs, lizards and insects.

"Their diet suggests that their venom is not intended for hunting, but instead for defense, which is the opposite of venomous snakes," noted Pelke. He added that their venom contains components that some believe could be useful for treating diabetes, cancer and diseases affecting memory, like Alzheimer's, and that pharmacological research on the venom is ongoing.

## VENOMOUS LIZARDS



**One of the Virginia Zoo's beaded lizards crawls over rocks in the Zoo's Eco Garden Wednesday, Oct. 5, 2011. Two beaded lizards are now receiving visitors in the Zoo's exhibit building (Virginia Zoo photo by Winfield Danielson).**

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*As an accredited Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) facility, the Virginia Zoo exhibits more than 400 animals on 53 beautifully landscaped acres. For more than a century, the Virginia Zoo has demonstrated a commitment to education and conservation, and offered a fun-filled day for visitors of any age. Open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and located at 3500 Granby Street in Norfolk. Daily admission prices are \$11.00 for adults, \$10.00 for seniors (age 62 and over) and \$9.00 for children ages 2-11. Visit [www.virginiazoo.org](http://www.virginiazoo.org) or call (757) 441-2374 for more information.*