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Leapin' lizards!

Book paints colorful picture of anoles

BY RICK ALLEN
STAR-BANNER

We call them chameleons, yard lizards. They'd like it if we'd use the proper term "anole," but mostly they'd prefer if we'd leave them some habitat.

How do we know? They told us, in a conversation recorded in Steve Isham's new book, "Anoles: Those Florida Yard Lizards," released in late April.

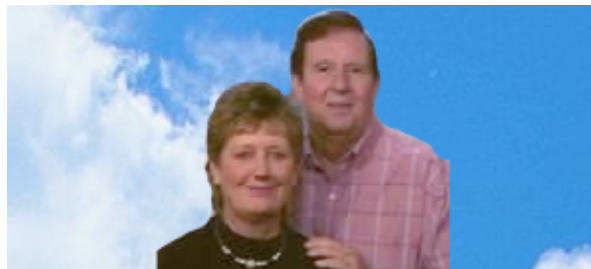
Told? Yes, the book is written as a conversation over a week between the author and a pair of anoles in his yard, a green named Ann and a Cuban brown named Noel (hint: say both names together fast and that's the pronunciation of the lizard).

"I decided to make it more animated. I didn't want it to read like a field guide," Isham says by phone from Orlando. "It adds a little zip.

"I wrote a draft of the book without the conversation; I thought it was bland. I wrote this as a crossover book to appeal to adults and youngsters alike."

Isham explains that after a tennis injury left him laid up, he'd sit in a lawn chair on his backyard deck absorbed for hours by the antics of the little lizards around him.

Later, he found there was little information available about the common yard critters.



Zoom

Steve Isham's new book, "Anoles: Those Florida Yard Lizards" is written as a conversation between the author and two yard lizards named Ann and Nole.

Not My Little Girl!

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Three years later, his findings reveal: There is little serious research into anoles, although a number of universities - including Harvard - have anole experts; anoles were the inspiration behind a citywide art project, similar to our own Horse Fever, in Orlando in 2000; the native green anoles are increasingly disappearing from Florida, due partly to dominance of an invading aggressive Cuban brown variety coupled with disappearing habitat.

"Plant some taller, denser shrubberies or trees with dangling vines," Isham urges. "You'll have a desirable habitat for green anoles, plus beneficial plants to reduce pollutants and conserve water in your yard. It's win-win."

Dori Jenkinson, an adult leader with the Marion County Hip-Hop-Herps 4-H Club, says she almost bought Isham's book while in Winter Park recently. "I'm kicking myself that I didn't."

While more knowledgeable about tree frogs, Jenkinson agrees with Isham that green anole sightings are becoming rarer. "It's almost like a rare treat to see a green one anymore."

"They're pretty much friendly little creatures that like to hang around our gardens," she adds. Several kids in Hip-Hop-Herps have anoles as pets.

"They're pretty neat little guys." Rick Allen can be reached at rick.allen@starbanner.com or 867-4122.

What is an anole?
Webster's gives the pronunciation as uh-NO-lee, like the cream-filled Italian pastry only not as messy. Steve Isham's book "Anoles: Those Florida Yard Lizards" says it's pronounced uh-NOLE, like attendees of a certain university in Tallahassee.

However pronounced, anoles are small arboreal lizards found throughout the southeastern United States, from Virginia through Texas, and in the Caribbean.

Anoles grow 5 to 7 inches long. They are not harmful to yards or pets. Main predators are cats, birds and humans.


Contrary to popular belief, not ALL the anoles in the world live in your yard.

Anoles are not chameleons, although their skin color can change under certain conditions. Male anoles can produce a ferocious-looking

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Florida Lizards

FOR YOUR INFORMATION
Anole tails will easily detach if grabbed by a predator

More than 11 million households in the United States own a reptile

"Anoles: Those Florida Yard Lizards" by Steven Isham, illustrations by Henry Flores. \$19.95 Available through Commahawk Publishing in Orlando at www.anolebook.com. Also available through order at most book stores.

Hip-Hop-Herps, a unit of the Marion County 4-H, meets at 5:30 p.m. the second Saturday of the month at the Marion County Extension Service complex, 2232 N.E. Jacksonville Road next to the Southeastern Livestock Pavilion. There won't be a meeting in July due to a members-only field trip. For more information, contact Dori Jenkinson at dorijenkinson@hotmail.com or 390-6257 or 208-3246.

"Anoles: Those Florida Yard Lizards," by Steve Isham, is available online.

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crest on their backs. And they can puff up their bodies to impress mates or rivals.

Neither are they skinks, salamanders or geckos.

Anoles have a third eye in the top of their heads. While it doesn't "see" the way the other two do, it helps keep the reptiles' biological and seasonal clock in tune.

Anoles climb vertical surfaces thanks to claws and tiny hair-like projections that bond with any surface.

Anoles are territorial and will run off rivals, especially during mating season.

Anoles eat bugs, primarily crickets, spiders, flies, small roaches and, when they can catch them, moths. They don't much like mosquitos, or lovebugs.

Male brown anoles are known to eat anole hatchlings, though it's not common.

Anoles generally require greenery, shade and a moist environment. They can be found in trees, shrubs, walls, fences and the walkpath right in front of you.

Anole also is a comic book character in the X-Men series. Known also as Victor Borkowski, his mutation gives him green skin, a prehensile and elastic tongue, the ability to stick to solid surfaces and camouflage. He is NOT Toad, the long-tongued arrogant baddie zapped by lightning in the first X-Men movie.

Here anole, there anole
There are as many as eight common varieties of anoles.

Native to the southeastern United States is the Carolina anole, also known as the green anole. Its primary color is, um, green, and it is a climber. In anole circles, it is pretty passive.

Another common anole in the Southeast is the brown anole, native to Cuba and the Bahamas. It has a rounded snout and its primary color is brown though it has a stripe the length of its back; dark brown for male varieties, a lighter shade for females. A more aggressive species, browns are primarily ground dwellers.

Native greens live above ground in trees and dense shrubbery; they require territory "the size of a large office" for a male and maybe three females, says author Steve Isham.

Invader browns dominate the ground and tree trunks; they require territory "about the size of an office desk for a male and his harem of six females" - one reason browns are dominating the landscape. Development also deprives greens of habitat; they are rarely seen now in southern and central parts of Florida.

No one is sure how or when the browns came to Florida, but experts speculate they came in on plants imported from Central America.

Anoles are inaudible. They communicate with body language such as head-bobbing as a warning and military-style push-ups to impress or intimidate.

Other varieties of anoles include: Puerto Rican crested, Culebra Island giant, knight and blue.

Lizard fossils date back to the Jurassic period, and anoles have been around about six million years.

WHAT'S THAT NECK THING ALL ABOUT?

The puffed-out piece of throat skin is called a dewlap. This flap can be found below the lower jaw of a number of animals, including amphibians, birds and mammals; several breeds of dogs have dewlaps. Anoles use their dewlaps to attract mates and intimidate rivals; the latter usually involves a lot of head bobbing, too. Mating season runs from March to October.

TALE OF THE TAIL

Like most lizards, anole tails will easily detach if grabbed by a predator. The lost piece of tail will continue twitching to distract the predator while the rest of the lizard flees. The process is known as autotomy and is common in lizards, starfish and lobster. Vertebrae weaknesses in the tail allow it to snap off. The tail regrows, but is never the same as the original. This can occur indefinitely.

LIZARDS AS PETS

More than 11 million households in the United States own a reptile, according to the 2005-2006 Nation Pet Owners Survey by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. That was up from 9 million two years previous.

Anoles eat crickets. You can buy them at a pet store or you can raise them yourself, provided you have no problem with the idea of deliberately raising bugs in your home. The crickets need to be gut-loaded with nutrients for the anole.

Anoles can live up to seven years in captivity; most wild anoles live about two years.

As a pet, anoles are relatively low maintenance; just food, water, sunlight or UV lamp and adequate enclosure. They do not require heat or a lot of other special needs. "They stay small and they're not noisy," says Dori Jenkinson of the 4-H Hip-Hop-Herps unit.

She adds that if you do get an anole for a pet, buy it from a pet store; they are bred in captivity and are used to it. "Don't snatch one out of your garden and put it into a cage," Jenkinson adds.

Sources: "Anoles: Those Florida Yard Lizards," Steve Isham, Dori Jenkinson, Savannah River Ecology Laboratory of the University of Georgia, wikipedia.org, Smithsonian National Zoological Park Web site, about.com, American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 2002 U.S. Pet Ownership and Demographic Sourcebook, Galveston County Master Gardeners/Texas A&M Web site.

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