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John uses the best kit to hand in order to ensure humane kills time after time

SERVING NATURE AND THE COMMUNITY

John R. Johnson from Down Goes Iguana is on the front lines of Florida's fight against invasive reptiles. Armed with precision air rifles and decades of field experience, he's leading the charge to control a fast-growing threat to the region's ecosystem, infrastructure and way of life

Airgun World (AW): In a nutshell, why do iguanas need to be controlled in Florida?

John R. Johnson (JRJ): Iguanas are an invasive species here in South Florida. Before the mid-1960s, there were no iguanas in Florida. They originally arrived via the pet trade and agricultural shipments from Central America and the Caribbean. Because they reproduce at a tremendous rate – 20 to 70 eggs per year, per female aged two-and-a-half years and older – their numbers have exploded over the past 60 years.

As an example, here on our four-by-six-mile island, I killed

730 iguanas in 2024, 56% of which were female. That's 409 females × an average of 50 eggs each = 20,450 eggs not laid. My 730 is only a drop in the bucket compared to the island's overall population. Imagine another 20,000 eggs hatching...?

They have no natural predators here. Yes, some will eat them – raptors while they're young, alligators, coyotes, bobcats, pythons, raccoons and so on. However, in urban areas, these predators are not as common as in the Everglades or wild regions. Also, iguanas are not nocturnal – many predators are – so they rarely cross paths.

They display a range of destructive behaviours. They are voracious eaters, which devastates gardens, farms and landscaping. They dig burrows, undermining structures, seawalls, roads, patios and homes – all very costly. They also carry salmonella in their faeces, which poses risks to pets, small children and older adults. Overall, they are a real and growing problem in South Florida.

Note – South Florida is the only place in the continental US with an established iguana population. Cold temperatures – such as 0°C for eight to 12 hours – kill iguanas. Even 4°C will render them comatose until they warm up. All other states, including North Florida, experience cold spells that kill them. As such, only here and Hawaii have the tropical climate to support iguanas.

AW: What initially drew you to iguana hunting, and how did you transition into using air rifles for this purpose?

JRJ: Marco Island is a small city. Like most cities, discharging firearms within city limits is prohibited. This limits iguana removal methods to trapping (ineffective), bow hunting, blowguns, pole snares and my choice – air rifles.

Iguanas are tough. Most break-barrels or BB guns lack the power to reliably kill them. Yes, there are exceptions, but a PCP air rifle is simply a more dependable choice. Also, state regulations require that they be humanely dispatched. Pumping five to 10 low-power shots into a struggling iguana is not considered humane.

AW: Can you share how your background has influenced your approach to controlling invasive iguanas?

JRJ: I grew up on the coast of Washington State in the Pacific Northwest. Like many families in that rural and wild region, we were what you'd call "subsistence hunters" – we ate everything we hunted or fished. Deer, elk, bear and all sorts of fowl were part of our diet.

Later at university, I joined the ROTC military shooting



Despite John's best efforts, more must be done to control the iguana population in Florida

team, as well as a student-run marksmanship team. So I had a strong background with firearms, and transitioning to air rifles was seamless for me.

AW: What specific air rifle setup do you prefer for iguana hunting, and why is it effective in your environment?

JRJ: Urban hunting presents a wide variety of situations. Safety is paramount, and shot distances vary greatly. I carry three rifles with me at all times. Because what can go wrong will go wrong – always have a backup. Shot distances can range from 10 to 60 yards. Iguanas vary – some are docile and allow close approach, others bolt at 75 yards, especially if I've previously removed 10 to 15 iguanas from the area.

All rifles are .25 calibre: Brocock Atomic Carbine – 3–12×32 compact scope – Predator Polymag 26gr; Brocock Sniper – 6–24×50 scope – JSB Diabolo King Heavy MKII 33.95gr; Reximex Throne Gen 2

– DNT Zulus video/audio scope – JSB Diabolo King Heavy MKII 33.95gr

Each gun/ammunition combination suits different needs. When possible, I use a Kopfjager carbon fibre tripod with Arca-Swiss mounts, and a collapsible stool when the situation allows. The Brocock Atomic can be freehanded, strapped or rested on a bean bag.

AW: How do you ensure humane and precise shots?

JRJ: Practice. I train for the exact types of environments and shots I take, including different yardages from 15 to 45 yards and elevated angles for iguanas in trees or on rooftops.

To ensure a humane kill, I need to hit a target roughly the size of a 2p coin. Headshots are preferred – body shots rarely stop them. However, only the upper third of an iguana's head is a vital area; the rest is mandible. I aim for that small upper section. I regularly practise on paper targets from 30.5 metres, and when I'm dialled

in, I'm hitting sub-1cm groups – more than enough for a humane kill.

AW: Are there optimal times or conditions for hunting?

JRJ: It depends on the season. In cooler months (low 20s), iguanas stay in burrows until 10am or 11am before coming out to warm themselves. In summer (high 20s to low 30s), they emerge earlier – around 8am or 9am.

The last three hours before sunset are also productive. They bask on warm surfaces like roof tiles, seawalls, docks, fibreglass or sunlit pavement. They also favour the sunny side of trees for visibility and safety.

AW: What are the biggest challenges you've faced?

JRJ: Safety is always the top priority. Many homeowners do not appreciate having their house, car or boat shot – understandably. You must assume that your pellet will go through the iguana and hit whatever is



behind it. Often that's water, which means the pellet may skip and create further hazards.

There are many shots I simply do not take. You must find a safe angle. Every trigger pull is a potential risk, so one-shot kills are ideal.

Another unusual challenge? People. When hunting near condos, pools or resorts, spectators gather. Phones come out to record the kill – not exactly traditional "hunting". With kids or the risk of ricochet nearby, I'll often decline the shot.

AW: Have you seen behavioural or population changes?

JRJ: Yes. Iguanas in areas where I've hunted before recognise me. They bolt as soon as I arrive, so I must adapt. Sometimes I bring clippers to create a small shooting lane through hedges.

Population-wise, I'm well ahead of past years. By 1 June 2025, I had removed 507 iguanas. It took until 1 November in 2024 to reach that same number. Their population is growing rapidly, as is my visibility through media and word of mouth.

AW: How do locals view your work? Have you done any outreach?

JRJ: I've gained a bit of a fan club, especially after several TV news features and a story that ran across USA Today's network. Locally, my vehicles are distinctive and recognisable.

I regularly post educational and light-hearted stories on local Facebook groups and other social media. I also send out an e-newsletter to hundreds of clients and subscribers.

I've created a PowerPoint presentation and give talks to

community groups. Those are usually well received.

AW: What's the impact of your work on the ecosystem and infrastructure?

JRJ: As I said earlier, 20,450 eggs not laid is a small dent. One person alone can't stop the rising tide – this needs to be a coordinated state and community effort.

Ultimately, the answer lies in birth control, similar to what's being done with mosquitoes. Global warming means we're unlikely to get another freeze strong enough to control the population naturally. Local governments often ignore the issue until it affects them directly – but by then, the problem may be out of control.

When iguanas reach a certain threshold, their population will grow faster than we can eradicate them. That day is coming. For

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John uses a tape measure to mark the size of a male iguana

airgunners, it will be a target-rich environment.

AW: How do you handle the ethical side of iguana hunting?

JRJ: Apart from ensuring a humane kill, I don't see any ethical concerns with following a state-mandated eradication programme. Iguanas cause real harm to the environment, other species and personal property. I see it daily.

I also enjoy the challenge and satisfaction of the hunt. It's no different to any number of hobbies – tennis, sailing, birdwatching, golf – except mine happens to benefit the community.

For those who view iguanas as exotic pets or "God's creatures," I completely respect that. I won't shoot iguanas on their property. That's their right. But if their neighbour asks me to remove them, I will – that's their right too.

What I strongly disagree with is the idea that someone has the right to be a nursery for hundreds more iguanas. These animals don't stay put – they expand territory, dig burrows and multiply rapidly. In 60 years, a few hitchhikers on fruit boats have turned into hundreds of thousands of invasive animals across hundreds of miles.

AW: Are there specific regulations or permits involved?

JRJ: The State of Florida designates iguanas as an invasive species. That gives the public a standing kill-on-sight order, with some local limits. No firearms in city limits. Kills must be humane. You must have permission on private property. No permits or licences are required. It's open season on all state lands and parks, with proper disposal protocols.

If you enjoy hunting, this is about as free of regulation as it gets.

AW: What do you do with the dead iguanas?

JRJ: I have several avenues:

Research: I donate specimens to the Tampa Bay Discovery Centre for invasive species research.

Education: Iguanas can be used in school biology classes

Taxidermy: I work with someone who tans their hides for leatherwork

Crab bait: Fishermen use the bodies in traps

FGCU: Florida Gulf Coast University uses them in its Central American Culture course. I donate 50+ each year for a taco feed

Food groups: South Florida's diverse communities appreciate iguana as a delicacy. The eggs are also prized. ■

For more information about the work of Down Goes Iguana, visit dg-iguana.com