

Giant lizards of the Canary Islands



Photo: LIFE06 NAT/E/000199

La Gomera giant lizard (*Gallotia bravoana*)

The lizards from the genus *Gallotia* are lacertids (wall lizards) unique to the Canary Islands. This group of lizards has been evolving on

Many islands in the world support their own unique reptile species, and the Canary Islands are no exception. In fact the archipelago supports its own genus of lizards, the *Gallotia* of the Lacertidae family of wall lizards, which includes eight endemic species and two recently rediscovered giant lizards*. In a series of projects featured over the following pages, LIFE has targeted the conservation of two of these critically endangered species – the giant lizards of El Hierro (pp. 29-30) and La Gomera (pp. 31-32).

* the El Hierro giant lizard (rediscovered in 1974), La Gomera giant lizard (1999), the 2007 rediscovery of the La Palma giant lizard (*G. auaritae*) is not fully confirmed

the islands since they were formed 20 million years ago, and all species have a common African ancestor. The endemic species and subspecies of the *Gallotia* genus have a number of characteristics that make them unusual in the lizard world: they are wholly or mostly plant-eaters or and several species have grown to a giant size thanks to the lack of predators in their island habitats (see table 1).

With exception of the Gran Canaria giant lizard, all the other lizards are considered critically endangered by IUCN. Their decline probably started up to 2 000 years ago with the arrival of humans on the Canaries. Today, the surviving populations of giant lizards present very reduced genetic variability and are under threat by predation by introduced species (particularly feral cats and rats) and by human activities (tourism and agriculture).

Table 1: Canary Islands giant lizards

Island	Scientific name	Annex Habitats Directive	LIFE project	Estimated individuals in the wild	Observations
El Hierro	<i>Gallotia simonyi</i>	II (* priority species)	LIFE94 NAT/E/001238 (1994-1996) LIFE97 NAT/E/004190 (1997-2000)	200 before the projects 300-400 including the individuals reintroduced under the LIFE projects	Rediscovered in 1974
La Gomera	<i>Gallotia bravoana</i>	II (* priority species)	LIFE02 NAT/E/008614 (2002-2005) LIFE06 NAT/E/000199 (2006-2010)	20 before the projects. Today estimated at 160 adults (plus the one in the captivity centre)	Listed in Annex II as <i>G. simonyi</i> as previously was described as such. Rediscovered in 1999
Gran Canaria Giant Lizard	<i>Gallotia stehlini</i>	IV	Not targeted	Abundant species	
Tenerife Speckled Lizard	<i>Gallotia intermedia</i>	Not included	Not targeted	500	The smallest of the giant lizards