

Iguanas are worse than ever and we're spending big bucks to get rid of them



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Experts say iguanas are even worse this year, and iguana removal businesses are booming. As packs of **invasive green iguanas devour landscapes, damage roofs and poop in pools**, desperate homeowners and condo associations are being forced to hire professionals to help keep the beasts at bay.

They are worse than ever, wrecking landscaping, roofs, sea walls, patios, home foundations and levees, experts say.

South Florida companies such as Iguana Control of Fort Lauderdale and Redline Iguana Removal of Hollywood are thriving and proliferating as quickly as the iguanas themselves. Now that summer has arrived, these specialized services — virtually unheard of a few years ago — are taking big bites out of maintenance budgets. They have become as ubiquitous as lawn mowing and pool services for property managers, municipalities, hotels and resorts. “Homeowner associations spend thousands of dollars on landscaping, and iguanas can go through that in a week,” says Perry Colato, co-owner of **Redline Iguana Removal**. “They also defecate by or in pools. Their feces carries salmonella, putting people at risk. They can lay up to 70 eggs a year and are now causing very serious issues.”





Blake Wilkins, left, and Perry Colato of Redline Iguana Removal of Hollywood with some of the iguanas they captured at the Cooper Colony Golf Course in Cooper City. Colato is a Hollywood Fire Rescue paramedic who started the business with his best friend, Wilkins, a biologist. (Mike Stocker / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

Colato, 26, a Hollywood Fire Rescue paramedic, started the business in September with his childhood friend, Blake Wilkins, 26, a biologist.

“Right now iguanas are reproducing like crazy and they don’t have any predators. I’ve been catching iguanas since I was a little kid,” Colato says. “At first it was fun. As I got older, I learned how detrimental to the environment and how much damage they cause to our homes and native plants and animals.”

[Out of control iguanas infesting South Florida »](#)

Thomas Portuallo, owner of **[Iguana Control](#)**, also says he’s seeing more of the reptiles this year, thanks to another mild winter. He’s been in business for 10 years and is busier than ever.

ABOLISH MANDATORY MEMBERSHIP

“I’ve seen 40 to 50 percent growth in homeowner services across the board each year,” says Portuallo, of Parkland. **“Iguanas are worse this year than they were last year.** There has been a big uptick in services to homeowner associations. **I tell corporate entities that you need to squeeze in another line item for iguana control,** either using my company or another. Iguana mitigation is here to stay. At least until [there is] a deep freeze in South Florida.”

Iguanas don’t just damage property. “They kick out endangered burrowing owls and eat their eggs,” Colato says. “They eat flowering plants, and that is affecting the monarch and Miami Blue butterflies. Iguanas love milkweed.”

Removal services

Dawn Braeseke, owner of Cooper Colony Golf Course in Cooper City, hired Redline to help rid her 67-acre public course of the nuisance pests.

“We’ve had thousands of iguanas on our property and they burrow under our sand traps and lay eggs and make tunnels up to 80 feet long,” says Braeseke. “You can drive up in a golf cart to a putting green and there can be up to 40 iguanas running away. It’s like Jurassic Park.”

Braeseke estimates she has spent about \$500 on services this year. A few years ago, she wasn’t spending any money on iguanas.

Prices for monthly or annual service varies depending on property size and the level of infestation. A year of monthly service can cost as much as \$3,000 for removal and filling in burrows, Colato says. Both companies offer free estimates.

“Those large orange iguanas can have a bunch of girlfriends, and they lay 60 to 70 eggs per year,” Braeseke says. “They eat all the trees and threaten all our birds and other native wildlife that live on the course. It’s a serious problem.”

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Iguanas love to hang around canals and lakes and use water to make quick escapes. They can hold their breath up to 20 minutes under water, according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. They just sit on the bottom until the coast is clear. Landowners can trap and humanely kill iguanas on their own private property, according to the FWC. But they cannot set traps or kill the reptiles in common areas in communities and condos owned by an HOA. That is why professional services may be needed for

removal. It also is against the law to trap or take possession of an iguana and transport it somewhere else and release it.

Several homeowner associations and property managers that use professional removal services declined to be interviewed. That's because many view iguanas as vermin and don't want their properties to be associated with such a problem, the iguana control companies said.



Redline Iguana Removal helps control invasive iguanas at Cooper Colony Golf Course in Cooper City. (Mike Stocker / Sun Sentinel)

Getting rid of 'em

It is **legal to shoot iguanas in the head with a pellet gun**, stab them in the brain and even decapitate them as long as they don't suffer, according to Florida law. University of Florida researchers say **bashing in an iguana's head** and destroying its brain quickly is the most humane way to kill one. It is a crime to drown, freeze or poison iguanas, according to the FWC.

ABOLISH MANDATORY MEMBERSHIP

There are things homeowners can do to discourage the pests from hanging around their property.

Collapsing burrows is the best way to control them. Iguanas like to dig out nests in yards and next to seawalls, Portuallo says. "Grab a shovel and collapse the holes, add dirt and keep at it as new holes appear. This will keep eggs from hatching and will eventually discourage them from nesting on your property," he says.

Physical barriers also can be useful tools to keep iguanas off your property. Portuallo installs tree and fence wraps, barriers for seawalls, telephone and electric wires. Redline offers similar services with prices ranging from \$25 to \$50 per tree.

[Expert tips on how to control iguanas »](#)

"We make a spray and also use crystal clear tree wrap," says Colato. The wrap prevents iguanas from climbing in trees to nest at night. "Other companies use sheet metal, but this is better because you can't see it. It's more attractive."

Both companies **[educate property managers and homeowners about iguana prevention](#)** by providing helpful tips online

at **Redlineiguana.com** and **Iguanacontrol.com**. They also follow FWC rules and regulations, and local laws, they say, humanely euthanizing the animals after trapping them.

Note to homeowners: It's against the law to trap or take possession of an iguana and transport it somewhere else and release it.

The FWC also educates the public on how to live with iguanas and protect property by making a few simple modifications to landscapes.

"Education, hazing and habitat modification is what we suggest," says Carol Lyn Parrish, an FWC public information coordinator. They love to eat all flowering plants, especially bougainvillea, hibiscus and orchids. "Make them unwelcome. They don't like waxy leaves or thick leaves. Plant crotons. Squirt them with a hose or install motion activated sprinklers. They don't like that."

Homeowners, HOAs, counties and cities also can request that the FWC conduct a free iguana technical workshop to help tackle large-scale community problems. Staff in the FWC south regional office also will answer questions at 561-625-5122.

The FWC has hired its first iguana technician based in the Florida Keys, which is suffering from a serious infestation, Parrish says. "That is very sensitive habitat in the Keys that the

iguanas are having a negative impact on. He's there to help educate the public in Monroe County and show how to trap and euthanize them."

She did not know if the agency would be hiring more iguana techs in other South Florida counties.

A deep freeze in the winter of 2009 put a big dent in the iguana population. But it's been 10 years since nature has taken its course.

"We just need a good sustained cold snap of 52 degrees of lower for 72 hours straight," says Parrish. "Until then, make them unwelcome."

For more information, consult the University of Florida IFAS Extension's page on iguanas at edis.ifas.ufl.edu/in528 and the FWC website at myfwc.com and type "iguanas" into the search bar.