

LEVELED BOOK • Q

Komodo Dragons: Giant Reptiles



Written by Louanne Silver

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Focus Question

What features allow the Komodo dragon to survive in the wild?



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Real Dragons

If you've ever read stories about dragons, you know that they're huge, fierce, often fire-breathing **reptiles** with powerful bodies and sharp claws. If you think they're just make-believe creatures in storybooks, think again. The Komodo dragon—the world's largest lizard—matches just about every detail of a dragon's description. Komodo dragons can't exactly breathe fire, but their bite is almost as deadly.

How Big Is It?

Komodo dragon
length: 10 feet (3 m)
weight: 176 pounds (80 kg)



Human
height: 6 feet (1.8 m)
weight: 176 pounds (80 kg)

Male dragons fight each other for females.



Built to Fight

Komodo dragons are the heavyweight wrestlers of the lizard world, and they're built for a fight. Grabbing their opponents with their forelegs, they attempt to throw them to the ground. They use their **muscular** tails for balance when standing upright, especially when two males fight. Dragons are covered with bony plates for protection from the bites and scratches of their opponents. Sharp, jagged teeth and huge claws come in handy in battle as well as for killing prey.

What Makes a Komodo Dragon a Reptile?

A Komodo dragon has rough black or yellow-gray skin with bony plates.

A Komodo dragon has about sixty sharp teeth for tearing flesh.

A Komodo dragon has a long tail with strong muscles.

A Komodo dragon has a forked tongue.

A Komodo dragon has long, curved claws.

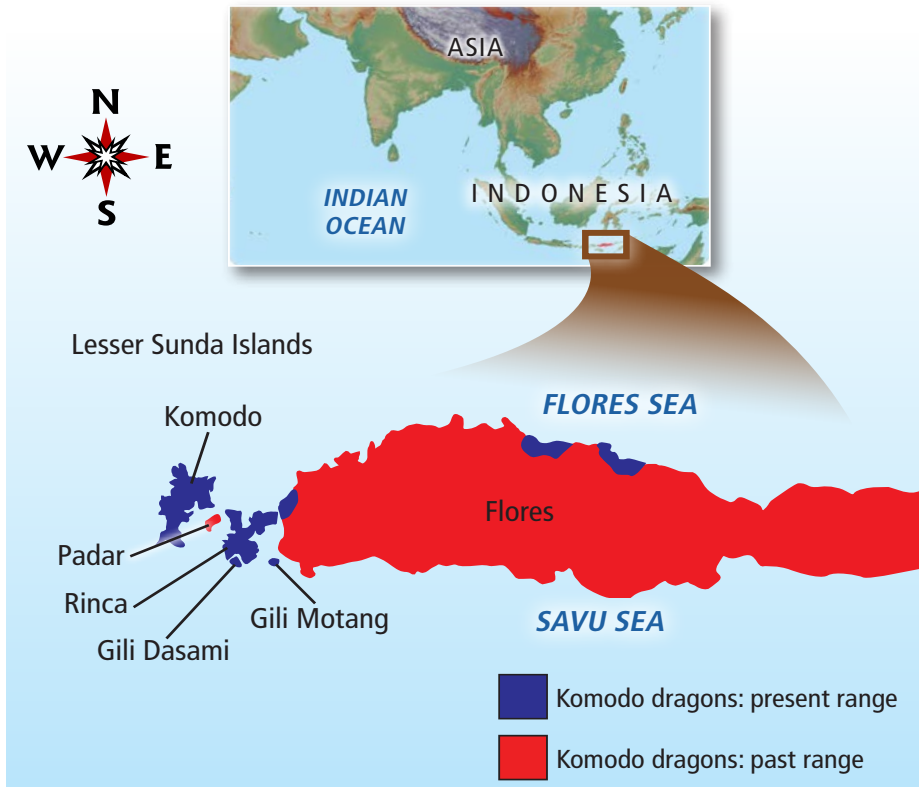
All reptiles

- have a backbone
- have scales or bony plates
- breathe with lungs

Most reptiles

- lay eggs
- are cold-blooded

Where Komodo Dragons Live



Island Home

Komodo dragons live on five small islands in the Asian country of Indonesia. These hilly islands have a mix of forests and grasslands. The weather is hot, with rainy and dry seasons. The dragons on two of the islands are much smaller than those on the other three islands. Their smaller size is an **adaptation** to less food and a harsher climate.

Dragons are strong swimmers. They can swim from one island to another, but most stay on their home island. They often walk along beaches, looking for dead fish that have washed ashore.

Komodo dragon burrows are often barely big enough for the dragons.



During the day, these giant lizards often deal with the heat by staying cool in burrows. At night, the burrows help them stay warm. They may dig their own burrow or use one made by another dragon. Komodo dragons usually spend their time alone—hunting, eating, and napping.



water buffalo



wild pig



Timor deer

Komodo dragons' three main prey animals were brought by humans to the islands where dragons live.

Dragon Food

Komodo dragons aren't picky about what they eat—as long as it's meat! They're hunters, and they also eat animals they find that have already died. Their main foods are deer, wild pigs, and water buffalo. They also eat rats, snakes, bird eggs, and dead fish. In addition, adults eat young dragons!

Komodo dragons can run to chase down prey. However, they're more likely to **ambush** and then overpower their prey. They often hide along trails, waiting for prey animals to pass by, and then attack.

Dragons don't usually immediately kill the animals they hunt. However, they may bite an animal, which then gets away. The bite usually causes death quickly or within a few days and in a variety of ways. The wound itself may cause the prey animal to bleed to death. Harmful **bacteria** from a dragon's mouth may cause a deadly infection. Prey animals may also die from an infection caused by standing in dirty water after being bitten by a dragon.

Scientists recently discovered that Komodo dragons have **venom**—a type of poison delivered with bites. More study is needed to understand how venom and bacteria are involved in bringing about the deaths of dragon prey.

A Komodo dragon can move at speeds of up to 13 miles per hour (20 kmph).



Dragons have a handy way of finding dead animals. They use their forked tongue to “taste” the air. Then they touch their tongue to a special **organ** on the roof of their mouth to identify tiny odor particles in the air. They can tell the direction of the prey by noticing which tongue tip had more particles. Then they take off in that direction to find their next meal.

Komodo dragons generally share kills. But watch out—mealtime is a time when fights break out between dragons.





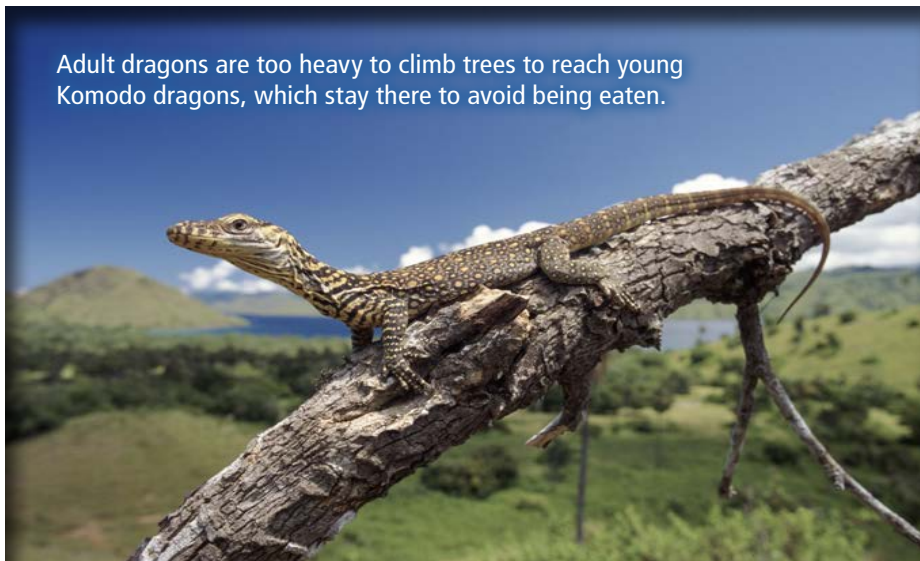
Baby dragons are a little over a foot long (0.3 m) when they hatch.

Dragon Babies

Female Komodo dragons may build a nest in the ground or on a hillside. Some may instead use a mound that a bird made for its nest. Dragons lay between ten and thirty-five eggs in a nest. The eggs take between six and nine months to hatch. During that time, the females stand guard to protect them from predators.

Baby dragons hatch at the end of the rainy season in April, when many insects are available for food. Babies are on their own right away. They climb trees to stay safe from adult dragons and other predators. Young dragons stay in the trees for two to four years. In addition to insects, they eat geckos, rodents, and birds. When they're older, they also eat leftovers from adult meals.

Adult dragons are too heavy to climb trees to reach young Komodo dragons, which stay there to avoid being eaten.



Komodo dragons become adults at around age seven. Males can live to the age of sixty. Females may only live half as long. Scientists think they die younger because of the extra energy needed to build nests and lay and guard eggs.

wowser!

- An adult Komodo dragon can eat more than three-quarters of its weight in food in one meal.
- An extra hinge in a Komodo dragon's lower jaw allows it to open its mouth and swallow food larger than its head.
- Young Komodo dragons sometimes roll in their own droppings so adult dragons won't try to hunt and eat them.



Saving Dragons

Only 3,000 to 5,000 dragons are alive in the wild. Because females have much shorter lives, as few as 350 breeding females may still be alive. Dragons are considered “vulnerable,” which means they are at risk of becoming endangered.

Dragons are losing their homes to people who clear wild land. Villagers may kill dragons that attack livestock. **Poachers** kill them or kidnap them for sale as pets. In some areas, Komodo dragons must compete with humans and wild dogs for enough food to eat.

Scientists around the world are working to keep Komodo dragons from becoming extinct. Some scientists study dragons in Indonesia to understand their habits and needs.

Conservation groups work with schools and communities to teach people how to help protect Komodo dragons. Since 1992, zoos in and outside of Indonesia have been successful in raising Komodo dragons. Many different zoos now work to help keep dragons alive.



A dragon uses its tongue to “taste” the air for clues about prey.

Monster Lizards

Komodo dragons—the largest lizards in the world—are fierce creatures and clever hunters. They have a wealth of adaptations to help them survive. In addition to sharp teeth and claws, they have huge, strong bodies that can overpower almost any opponent.

More than seventy zoos around the world have Komodo dragons. You may be lucky enough to see one of these amazing animals someday. If so, you may find yourself admiring the perfect design of these heavyweight wrestlers. You may also gaze in awe as you remember that dragons aren’t just in storybooks—they’re real!

Glossary

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| adaptation (<i>n.</i>) | a change in an organism or species that allows it to survive better in its environment (p. 7) |
| ambush (<i>v.</i>) | to conduct a surprise attack from a hidden position (p. 9) |
| bacteria (<i>n.</i>) | small one-celled organisms that sometimes cause infections and disease (p. 10) |
| conservation (<i>n.</i>) | the protection of wild lands and the living things found there (p. 14) |
| muscular (<i>adj.</i>) | having large, strong muscles (p. 5) |
| organ (<i>n.</i>) | a part of an organism that has a specific function, such as the kidneys or lungs (p. 11) |
| poachers (<i>n.</i>) | people who kill wild animals illegally (p. 14) |
| reptiles (<i>n.</i>) | cold-blooded animals with a backbone that are covered with scales or plates (p. 4) |
| venom (<i>n.</i>) | a poisonous fluid that some animals use to kill prey and defend themselves, usually delivered by biting or stinging (p. 10) |

Words to Know

adaptation

ambush

bacteria

conservation

muscular

organ

poachers

reptiles

venom

Front and back cover: Komodo dragons mainly live in open forests that have patches of sunlight.

Title page: A Komodo dragon walks along a beach looking for dead fish to eat.

Page 3: While young Komodo dragons often use their claws for climbing trees, adults mainly use their claws as weapons.

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Connections

Writing

Write an adventure story featuring a Komodo dragon. Include facts about Komodo dragons in your story.

Science

Research another reptile. Write about the ways it is similar to and different from the Komodo dragon.



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