



Friends of Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve

About Nature: Amphibians and Reptiles

There are many lizards, snakes, toads, and frogs in the preserves! Some are common, others seen only occasionally by preserve visitors. The following species are residents. Four are profiled in the following pages: Western fence lizard, Coast horned lizard, Southern alligator lizard, and Western rattlesnake.

Aneides lugubris	Arboreal salamander
Batrachoseps major	Slender garden salamander
Pseudacris hypochondriaca	Pacific tree frog or Baja chorus frog
Lithobates catesbeianus	American bullfrog (invasive)
Anaxyrus boreas	Western toad
Spea hammondi	Western spadefoot toad (vernal pools)
Xenopus laevis	African clawed frog (invasive)
Actinemys marmorata	Western pond turtle
Trachemys scripta	Red eared slider (invasive)
Elgaria multicarinata ssp. Webii	Southern alligator lizard
Sceloporus occidentalis	Western fence lizard
Aspidoscelis hyperythrus	Orange throated whiptail
Aspidoscelis tigris	Western whiptail (likely)
Plestiodon skiltonianus	Western skink
Plestiodon gilbertii	Gilbert's skink (likely)
Uta stansburiana	Western side-blotched lizard
Phrynosoma blainvillii	Blainville's horned lizard
Pituophis catenifer ssp. Annectens	San Diego gopher snake
Masticophis flagellum ssp. Piceus	Red coachwhip (likely)
Coluber constrictor mormon	Western yellow-bellied racer
Masticophis lateralis	California striped racer
Thamnophis hammondi	Two-striped garter snake
Thamnophis elegans	Terrestrial garter snake (possible)
Lampropeltis californiae	California king snake
Crotalis ruber	Red diamond rattlesnake
Crotalus oreganus	Southern Pacific rattlesnake
Diadophis punctatus	Ringneck snake
Hypsiglena ochrorhynchus	Coastal night snake
Lichanura orcutii	Coastal rosy boa
Tantilla planiceps	California black-headed snake
Rena humilis	Southwestern blind snake
Rhinocheilus lecontei	Long nosed snake

Western Fence Lizard, *Sceloporus occidentalis*

Family: Phrysonomatidae

Sceloporus from the Greek *skelos*, meaning leg and *porus*, meaning pores in reference to their femoral pores located along the underside of the leg. The name *occidentalis* refers to their western distribution. The species as a whole (*S. occidentalis*) is called the Western Fence Lizard. These lizards are more commonly called "Blue-bellies" or "Swifts."



Description

The Western Fence Lizard measures 3 1/2 inches ([snout-vent length](#)), and is about six inches in total length.

Coloration ranges from light gray to black with dark blotches on the back that continue down the tail. Male Western Fence Lizards have bright blue, sometimes greenish, bellies, and the undersides of their legs are yellow. Females lack this decorative coloring. The scales are [keeled](#) and somewhat spiny.

Subspecies: There are as many as five subspecies. Only the San Joaquin Fence Lizard (*S. o. biseriatus*) and the Channel Islands Fence Lizard (*S. o. becki*) occur in our region.

Range and Habitat

The Western Fence Lizard is distributed throughout eastern Oregon, southwest Idaho, all of Nevada, western Utah, Southern California, and northwestern Baja California. A disjunct population occurs on Isla de Cedros; a Pacific Ocean island off of Baja California.

It is commonly found from the coast to the highest mountain areas at over 6,000 feet. It isn't found in the desert. This lizard is conspicuous and common in its range. It thrives in a wide variety of habitats, ranging from coastal sage scrub and chaparral on the coast and foothills, to the forests of higher elevations. It's usually found on or near the ground, in rock and wood piles, tree trunks, and the lower branches of shrubs.

Natural History

Behavior: This aptly named lizard enjoys sitting on prominent points, like fence posts, where it can sun itself, and watch for food and predators. Like many species of lizards, this one is able to change its general coloration to match its background. Light colored lizards placed on dark rocks become a darker color. Interestingly, some lizards remain dark when placed on a light background, mimicking a shadow cast by an imperfection or crack in the rock surface.

Prey and Predators: Its diet consists of insects and various other arthropods. Unfortunately, its love of high places makes it easy prey for snakes, hawks, and predaceous mammals. Kingsnakes and Striped Racers are particularly fond of fence lizards. The Western Fence Lizard avoids danger through constant vigilance and fast reflexes.

Breeding: Mating occurs in May or June. As many as ten eggs per [clutch](#) can be laid as early as July, producing hatchlings as early as mid-August. Upon hatching, the little ones measure about 2 1/4 inches in total length.

Did you know...

The bright blue patches along the sides of the body of the male give this lizard the common name of "Blue-belly."

From <http://archive.sdnhm.org/fieldguide/herps/scel-occ.html>, text by Dick Schwenkmeyer

Photo by Jim Melli

Coast Horned Lizard, *Phrynosoma coronatum*

Family: Phrynosomatidae

Phrynosoma is derived from Greek -- *phrynos*, meaning "toad," and *soma*, meaning "body." *Coronatus* is Latin for "crowned."

Description

The Coast Horned Lizard is relatively large and less rounded than other horned lizards. An individual's snout-vent length can reach 4 inches. Numerous pointed scales stick out along the sides of the body and over the back, though only the horns around the head are rigid.

The back pattern begins with two large, dark blotches behind the head, followed by three broad bands on the body and several smaller bands on the tail. The general coloration consists of various shades of brown with cream colored accents around the blotches and the outer fringe of scales.



Range and Habitat

The Coast Horned Lizard's range extends from northern California to the tip of Baja California. The subspecies found in southern California, *blainvillii*, is distributed throughout the foothills and coastal plains from Los Angeles area to northern Baja California. It frequents areas with abundant, open vegetation such as chaparral or coastal sage scrub. A ground dweller, it's never seen climbing into shrubs or trees, or onto the sides of large boulders.

Natural History

Perhaps the horned lizard's best defense mechanism is its disruptive or [cryptic coloration](#), which is so similar to their background they become indistinguishable from it. This is partly due to its ability to change its own color to match its background environment. Its flat profile helps prevent shadows that might be detected by an observant predator, such as a hawk flying overhead or a coyote patrolling the ground. Most predators would have difficulty grabbing these lizards because of their horns. They are known to swivel their head back in attempts to stab the hand which grasps.

Ants are the favorite food of horned lizards, making up about 50% of their diet. The lizards also eat honeybees and a variety of other insects.

The Coast Horned Lizard produces clutches of 6 to 21 eggs from May to June. Hatching occurs in August and September.

Conservation Status

The Coast Horned lizard is currently a Federal Special Concern species (FSC) and a California Special Concern species (DFG-CSC). California Department of Fish and Game gives them full protection from collecting.

A number of factors contribute to the decline of this species. The subspecies *blainvillii* is believed to be extinct in 45% of its original range in southern California. The most serious threat is the destruction of its preferred habitat along the coast. Populations in undisturbed areas seem to fare quite well, although the introduction of Argentine Ants (*Iridomyrmex humilis*) are now replacing the native ant food base. It was heavily exploited at the turn of the century for the curio trade; horned Lizards were varnished and sold to visiting tourists from the east coast, or simply sold as pets to take home as a souvenir. Later, biological supply companies and the modern pet trade contributed to their exploitation, until 1981, when commercial collecting was banned.

From <http://archive.sdnhm.org/fieldguide/herps/phry-cor.html>. Text by Dick Schwenkmeyer and Brad Hollingsworth. Photo of juvenile Horned Lizard by Jim Melli

Southern Alligator Lizard, *Elgaria multicarinata*

Family Anguidae.

The name *multicarinata* means "many-keeled." This species was formerly called *Gerrhonotus multicarinatus*.

Description

Size: The Southern Alligator Lizard has a long, slender body -- up to seven inches -- with relatively small legs. An individual that has never suffered caudal anatomy in an encounter with a predator, may have a tail nearly twice the length of its body, making the largest individuals 21 inches from end to end. An individual with less luck may have a regenerated tail which is shorter and usually a different color from the rest of its body.



Coloration: The body and tail color varies from brown to yellow ochre. Adult lizards are marked with dark crossbands, while juveniles are not. The scales on the back are large, with very pronounced keeling. The skin texture appears rough, a condition resulting from their keeled scales.

Alligator Lizards, especially the males, have large, triangular-shaped heads, giving them a formidable appearance. The large head and long, snake-like body make a chance encounter in the woodpile, or under a shrub, startling, to say the least.

Subspecies: There are as many as five subspecies. Only the San Diego Alligator lizard (*E. m. webbi*), the Los Coronados Island Alligator lizard (*E. m. nana*), and the San Martin Island Alligator lizard (*E. m. ignava*) occur in our region.

Range and Habitat

The Southern Alligator Lizard's range extends from the state of Washington to central Baja California. In southern California, this species is most frequently found throughout the coastal plains, although it has been observed in mountainous regions up to 7500 feet elevation.

The Southern Alligator Lizard is often seen in yards and gardens, sometimes out in the open or in the garage, but usually under piles of wood, rock, or other debris. Don't be surprised to find them on your porch or patio.

Natural History

Alligator Lizards have prehensile tails. By using the tail as a support, or to hang onto branches, they can maneuver through vegetation quite effectively.

Their diet includes various insects, small animals such as young mice and birds, tree frogs, and even other lizards. After the May mating season, up to 20 eggs can be laid in June or July. The incubation period is about 55 days, after which the hatching yields tiny individuals, rarely more than three inches long from nose to tail.

Did you know...

The discovery of the Southern Alligator Lizard resulted from collections made during the U.S.-Mexican Boundary Survey of the mid-1850s.

Conservation Status

The Alligator Lizard has successfully adapted to most urban habitats, and no apparent problems exist among local populations.

From <http://archive.sdnhm.org/fieldguide/herps/elga-mul.html>. Text by Dick Schwenkmeyer.

Western Rattlesnake, *Crotalus viridis*

Family Viperidae.

Crotalus comes from the Greek *crotalon*, a rattle or little bell; *viridis* is Latin for green.

Description

Size: The Western Rattlesnake can reach lengths slightly over 4 feet, but 2 1/2 feet is more the norm.

Coloration: The Western Rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis*) is a widely distributed and highly variable species. In our region, this snake is lighter gray or brown. Pale margins edge the pattern of its dark dorsal blotches. In some individuals, the pale margins can be yellow, giving the snake a greenish cast. Specimens from high elevations can be a velvety, jet black with only a slight hint of patterning. A light stripe runs from outside corner of the eye to the corner of the mouth, and the tail has dark rings. Juveniles have a yellowish tail, and their dorsal patterning contrasts more than that in adults.



Subspecies: There are as many as nine subspecies. Only the Southern Pacific Rattlesnake (*C. v. helleri*) and the Los Coronados Island Rattlesnake (*C. v. caliginis*) occur in our region.

Range and Habitat

The Western Rattlesnake is distributed across most of the western United States, Mexico, and Canada. The Southern Pacific Rattlesnake (*C. v. helleri*) is distributed from southern California to the central part of the Baja California. The Los Coronados Island Rattlesnake (*C. v. caliginis*) is found only on the southern island of the Coronados Islands, off the Pacific coast of northern Baja California.

In southern California, this species is [cismontane](#) and is not found on the eastern slopes of the mountains. The Western Rattlesnake enjoys a wide range of habitats from seacoast to pine wooded mountain heights, and is tolerant of disturbed areas. It is the most abundant rattler of our region, west of the desert.

Natural History

Behavior: In early spring, the Western Rattlesnake basks in the sun or glides around as it looks for food and mates. In dense chaparral, where little sun reaches the ground, it may climb to the tops of bushes to bask. As the weather warms, it becomes more active at dusk or at night.

Prey and Predators: Their diet includes small mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians.

Breeding: A female may bear 4 to 12 young in late summer.

Conservation Status

There has been no proposed conservation status. Because of widespread negative attitudes towards snakes, very few conservation programs, worldwide, have been created. A much higher percentage of snakes are threatened with extinction than is currently recognized. Therefore, snakes are particularly susceptible to being overlooked by conservation-minded biologists.

From <http://archive.sdnhm.org/fieldguide/herps/crot-vir.html>. Contributed by Jim Melli.