



Reptiles are defining animals of Mojave Desert ecology. Most go weeks or months without a meal – or even water. Many burrow or live in crevices that shelter them from extreme weather, and a “cold-blooded” metabolism lets them thrive in heat most animals cannot tolerate. For many Southern Paiute people, reptiles are guardians of the desert, quietly watching from nearby hiding places.

Desert Specialists



Many reptiles have exceptional eyesight and color vision. Male yellow-backed spiny lizards (*Sceloporus uniformis*) use their vibrant colors to attract mates.



Common side-blotched lizards (*Uta stansburiana*) are the most seen reptiles in Red Rock Canyon. Dominant males compete fiercely over the best rock piles.



Gopher snakes (*Pituophis catenifer*) reach around 5 ft (150 cm) as adults. They bask in the sun before infiltrating burrows to hunt small mammals.



Desert iguanas (*Dipsosaurus dorsalis*) are one of the only animals that eats creosote bush (*Larrea tridentata*), often digging burrows near their favorite patches.



Common chuckwallas (*Sauromalus ater*) are herbivores that live in boulderfields. They retreat into crevices for protection, puffing themselves full of air to wedge in.



Desert horned lizards (*Phrynosoma platyrhinos*) eat small insects like ants and termites. They shoot blood from their eyes to repel potential predators.

Mojave Mascot

The Mojave desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) is Nevada's state reptile! Despite living here for over two million years, it is a federally listed **threatened species**, meaning it will become endangered if current trends of habitat fragmentation, illegal collection, overgrazing, and OHV use continue.



Mojave desert tortoises spend over 80% of their lives in burrows. Once built, they provide homes for other animals, including burrowing owls (*Athene cunicularia*).



Mojave desert tortoises eat desert vegetation and are important seed dispersers. They can retain water in their bodies for up to a year without drinking.



Venom

Venom is a type of toxin produced by many different animals. Venom has to be injected into the bloodstream, as opposed to poison, which is active when eaten, spread on skin, or inhaled. No reptiles in Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area are poisonous, but several are venomous.



The only venomous lizard in the United States is the Gila monster (*Heloderma suspectum* - above). Gila monsters lack the "hypodermic" fangs of venomous snakes, so they chew their venom to administer it. Deaths from Gila monster bites are known (though rare), but infections resulting from bites are more likely to cause serious harm than the venom. They spend most of their lives underground, so sightings are uncommon and special.



Three species of rattlesnakes are known to live in Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area: the desert sidewinder (*Crotalus cerastes*), the Mojave rattlesnake (*Crotalus scutulatus* - above), and the Panamint rattlesnake (*Crotalus stephensi*). The Mojave rattlesnake is the most common and most venomous. Rattlesnakes are not aggressive and will only bite in defense, usually when accidentally stepped on or grabbed.

Seek medical attention if you are bitten by any reptile, as many non-venomous reptiles carry disease. Try to get a picture of the animal that bit you to help your medical professional determine the best course of care. Never try to suck the venom out, as this increases risk of infection.

Protecting Reptiles

Reptiles dig burrows other animals call home, disperse plant seeds, and control rodent and insect populations. They are central to the Mojave Desert ecosystem. Still, reptiles face threats throughout the region, mostly from human development over the last half century.

As urban centers grow, habitat fragmentation is one of the greatest risks to reptile populations. Reptiles are typically slow moving and warm up on roadways, especially just after dark, and many reptiles like desert tortoises seek shade under cars in the middle of the day. Please drive cautiously, check under vehicles before you move them, and pack out all trash to help Red Rock Canyon's reptiles fulfill their role as guardians of the desert for generations to come.



Reptiles of Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area

Colubridae (colubrid snakes)

- Arizona elegans* (glossy snake)
- Diadophis punctatus* (ring-necked snake)
- Hypsiglena chlorophaea* (desert nightsnake)^v
- Lampropeltis californiae* (California kingsnake)
- Masticophis flagellum* (coachwhip)
- Masticophis taeniatus* (striped whipsnake)
- Phyllorhynchus decurtatus* (western leaf-nosed snake)
- Pituophis catenifer* (gopher snake)
- Rhinocheilus lecontei* (long-nosed snake)
- Salvadora hexalepis* (western patch-nosed snake)
- Sonora occipitalis* (Mojave shovelnose snake)
- Sonora semiannulata* (ground snake)
- Tantilla hobartsmithi* (southwestern blackhead snake)
- Trimorphodon lambda* (Sonoran lyre snake)^v

Crotaphytidae (collared lizards)

- Crotaphytus bicinctores* (desert collared lizard)
- Gambelia wislizenii* (long-nosed leopard lizard)

Eublepharidae (eyelid geckos)

- Coleonyx variegatus* (western banded gecko)

Helodermatidae (beaded lizards)

- Heloderma suspectum* (Gila monster)^v

Iguanidae (iguanas)

- Dipsosaurus dorsalis* (desert iguana)
- Sauromalus ater* (common chuckwalla)

Leptotyphlopidae (threadsnakes)

- Rena humilis* (western threadsnake)

Phrynosomatidae (spiny lizards)

- Phrynosoma platyrhinos* (desert horned lizard)
- Callisaurus draconoides* (zebra-tailed lizard)
- Sceloporus graciosus* (common sagebrush lizard)
- Sceloporus magister* (desert spiny lizard)
- Sceloporus occidentalis* (western fence lizard)
- Sceloporus uniformis* (yellow-backed spiny lizard)
- Urosaurus graciosus* (long-tailed bush lizard)
- Urosaurus ornatus* (ornate tree lizard)
- Uta stansburiana* (common side-blotched lizard)

Scincidae (skinks)

- Plestiodon gilberti* (Gilbert's skink)

Teiidae (whiptails and tegus)

- Aspidoscelis tigris* (western whiptail)

Viperidae (vipers)

- Crotalus cerastes* (desert sidewinder)^v
- Crotalus scutulatus* (Mojave rattlesnake)^v
- Crotalus stephensi* (Panamint rattlesnake)^v

Xantusiidae (night lizards)

- Xantusia vigilis* (desert night lizard)

Testudinidae (tortoises)

- Gopherus agassizii* (Mojave desert tortoise)

v = venomous