

Lizards are welcome denizens of the desert

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Many lizards, such as the banded geckos, can tighten muscles on either side of the tail and snap it off at a weak spot in the backbone; distracting the predator as it continues to wriggle about. The tail later regrows, though usually stubbier than the original.

Most lizards are voiceless, but the gecko makes sounds which vary from chirps to squeaks to barks. Our desert geckos are attractive: small (4-6 inches), and dark bands over the back and tail. They are night feeders of insects and spiders.

The collared lizard will reach 8-14 inches, with a fairly large head, plump body and long tail. It is named for the one or two black-collar markings, and is otherwise brightly colored.

They feed on insects, and can bite hard if caught.

The horned lizard, or "horny toad," is 5- to 7-inches long, including a very short, fat tail. The "horns" are varying lengths of elongated scales on its head and back, with two rows of spines along each side.

In Arizona it's called the Regal horned lizard. It eats spiders and insects and is very fond of ants.

When frightened it can squirt blood from the corner of its eyes.

Obviously all these characteristics have endeared the horny toad to small boys, but their ideal temperature is unduly hot for humans, and the average home temperature is too cold for them to function properly. Besides, how would you provide quantities of live

active ants? So admire them, and leave them where they are.

The scales of skinks are smooth, flat and glossy. They feed on insects, spiders and worms. Skinks are diggers and burrowers. Though fairly short-legged, they are fast



moving. The mother skink is the only lizard that "broods" her eggs until they hatch.

Climbing and ground utas have irregular-sized scales of dull stripes or speckles.

Whiptails or racerunners may be striped, checkered, spotted or mottled, but all have a long, pointy snout. Their movements are so fast and jerky, it is hard to get a good look at them.

The desert iguana or crested lizard has a 12- to 15-inch spotted

length which is two-thirds tail. It is primarily a vegetarian, feeding during the day. Many iguanas can be identified by the curious habit of "doing pushups" by bobbing up and down to defend their territory.

Other desert iguanas are the

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leopard lizard, with various brown spots on tan; the zebra-tailed; and the fringe-toed lizard, also called the sand swimmer of the dunes.

The zebra-tailed is sometimes named the gridiron-tailed because of the wide black bands on the tail. Closely resembling them is the earless lizard, which runs with its banded tail curled over its back — at first glance, it makes you think "scorpion."

There are many species of spiny lizards or fence lizards and swifts.

They are good climbers, and "swift," as their name implies.

The largest desert lizard is the Gila monster, which can reach 2 feet of short, fat tail and broad body of beautiful black and pink "beads." Their slow movements are deceptive; when annoyed they can run, twist, turn, and bite swiftly and hang on strongly. Poisonous, rare, and protected since 1952, count yourself lucky when you see one, but do not annoy it.

Since most lizards eat ants, beetles, flies, grasshoppers, crickets, centipedes and caterpillars, spiders and snails and other insects and small creatures, lizards are welcome denizens of our desert.

The Desert Foothill Library has a dozen or more interesting books on reptiles and lizards. Many of these books are found in the young people's section.



GILA MONSTERS are an endangered species in Arizona. They are poisonous, but won't bite unless seriously provoked.