

All you need to know about lowly lizards

Editor's note: This is the first of two parts.

by Jo Walker

Reptiles are cold-blooded, air-breathing vertebrates with scaly skin that lay shelled eggs on land (this rules out fish, birds and mammals). Sometimes they are confused with amphibians, but amphibians (frogs, toads and salamanders) have smooth, moist skin, no claws on the feet, and lay eggs in a jelly-like mass in water.

There are four living orders of reptiles (class *Reptilia*):

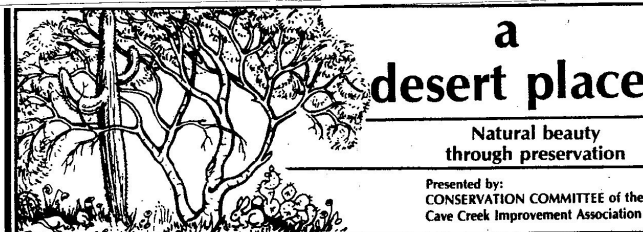
1. *Rhynchocephalia*: A rare endangered species living on islands near New Zealand.

2. *Crocodylia*: In the United States there are two species of alligators and crocodiles.

3. *Chelonio*: The turtles, terrapins and tortoises (45 species in the United States).

4. *Squamata*: Snakes (suborder Serpentes, 110 United States species) and lizards (suborder Sauria, 90 United States species), and worm-lizards (suborder Amphisbaenia). Lizards are mainly small, agile, dry-skinned, long-bodied reptiles whose tails make up at least half their total length.

There are 19 families of lizards and around 3,000 species worldwide. Families found in the United States include: *Teiidae* (whiptails or racerunners), *Iguanidae* (American chameleon, iguanas and horned toads), *Scincidae* (skinks), *Gekkonidae* (geckos), *Anguidae* (lateral-fold lizards or alligator lizards), *Xantusidae* (night lizards), *Helodermatidae* (beaded lizards — the only poisonous lizards), and *Anniellidae* (legless lizards).



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With 90 species of lizards in the United States, even the experts sometimes have trouble identifying them, especially since each may vary in color, depending on age, sex and even locality, with color varying to match the rocks they live on.

Lizards have scales all over the body, varying in texture from very smooth to the Gila monster's beads. They have teeth for eating either plants or insects, moveable eyelids, external ear openings, with good eyesight and hearing, and a good sense of smell with "taste" organs in their tongue. Their three-valved heart is simpler than that of mammals. Like snakes, they shed their skin periodically as they grow, exposing a fresh, new skin underneath. Lizards lay small clutches of two to 15 eggs in a protected spot. In some species, the eggs hatch immediately after being laid, but the Gila monster's eggs won't hatch for a month after being laid.

Night lizards are an exception — their young are born alive, two or three at a time. A lizard's ter-

ritory is fairly small, so you will repeatedly see the same lizard sunning itself on the same rock or windowsill. Lizards' long legs elevate their body off the hot ground to avoid overheating and can take them around at speeds of 15-20 miles per hour.

In the hottest, driest months they may estivate, burying themselves in sand or under rocks until the worst heat is over. However, some desert lizards require more heat than other creatures, and move back and forth between patches of sun and shade to regulate their body temperature.

Chuckwallahs will spend the cold desert night in holes or rock crevices, warm up in the morning sun, then climb into low bushes to feed and cool off during the day. The chuckwalla can reach 16 inches in length, with a thick, heavy tail. A vegetarian, it eats flowers and fruit of the cactus, plus other tender parts of desert plants. When threatened, it hides in rock crevices, and by swallowing air, it can inflate its size by an additional 60 percent — making it difficult to remove.



A desert lizard climbs atop a rock to bask in the warm sun.