

Common Chuckwalla

Sauromalus ater

Reptile

Scientific Name

Sauromalus ater

Other Names

None

Range

Mojave and Sonoran deserts of southeastern California, southern Nevada and Utah, western Arizona south to Sonora, Mexico and the mainland and islands of Baja California.

Habitat

Desert open flats, outcroppings, lava fields and rocky areas.

Description

A large, plump lizard with skin folds around the neck and shoulders. Males are slightly larger than females and have a black head, shoulders and limbs with varying coloration of the torso and tail ranging from pale grey to bright red depending upon the habitat. Females have greyish-brown bodies with mottled grey markings and faint grey bands down the tail.

Average Size

Length: 11 – 18 in.

Weight: 8 – 9 oz.

Lifespan

In the wild: 10 – 30 years

In captivity: 50 + years

Diet

In the wild: Flowers, leaves and succulent fruit

In captivity: Fruit, vegetables and occasional insects

Clutch Size

5 – 16 eggs

Incubation

33 – 50 days

Sexual Maturity

2 – 3 years of age, depending on size

Predators

Hawks, Kestrels and Coyotes

Population Status

Not Threatened



Behavior

These solitary, diurnal lizards emerge in the morning and before seeking food, bask in the sun until they reach an optimum body temperature of 100 - 105 degrees Fahrenheit. Because of this need for high heat, most Common Chuckwallas hibernate underground in the cooler months and emerge in February or early spring. Males fiercely defend territories just under an acre in size that encompass the territories of several females.

Common Chuckwallas adopt an extremely flat posture while basking to maximize heat absorption as well as to camouflage from aerial predators. They are primarily herbivorous, feeding on leaves, fruit and flowers with insects as supplementary prey. These lizards are said to prefer prickly pear fruit and yellow flowers, such as those of the brittlebush.

When the Common Chuckwallas sense danger, they quickly wedge themselves into a tight crevice and gulp air to fill their loose skin folds, increasing to twice their size so predators cannot extricate them from their hiding spot. Like many lizards, chuckwallas are capable of autotomy, where they have the ability to drop and then re-grow their tail if necessary to evade predation. The wiggling tail is left behind to distract the predator as the lizard makes a getaway.

Reproduction and Breeding

In most parts of the Common Chuckwallas' range, an abundance of resources tends to create a hierarchy based on size. One large male will dominate the area's smaller males and allow them exclusive breeding rights to the available females. They use a combination of color and physical displays, namely "push-ups", head-bobbing and mouth gaping, to communicate and defend their territory from other males in the area.

Mating occurs in the late spring and summer months of April to July, with males mating with several females in the area. The females only lay eggs every two to three years depending upon rain cycles, and will bury them between June and August in a shallow nest excavated in moist soil where they stand guard. When the youngsters hatch, however, they must make their way into rocky, hidden areas without any guidance or parental care from the adults.

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Conservation

These animals are considered common throughout their range and are listed as a species of least concern by the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature). They are affected by the increasing number of human settlements being built in their desert habitat, but do receive protection when inside the boundaries of National Parks such as Mojave and Joshua Tree.

Amazing Facts

There are five species of Chuckwalla.

This is the 2nd largest lizard in the southwestern United States, behind the Gila Lizard.

Chuckwallas' teeth grow in grooves inside their mouth. If they lose one, they will re-grow another to replace it.

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