Cabrillo

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Cabrillo National Monument

Reptiles and Amphibians

Cold-blooded, not cold-hearted.

The Coastal Sage Scrub environment at Cabrillo National Monument supports a diverse community of mammals, birds, amphibians and reptiles. This handout will serve to provide you with important and interesting information about the snakes, lizards and amphibians found within this ecosystem.

The origin of reptiles on our earth began aproximatly 300 million years ago. Modern reptiles inhabit every continent and there are 8,000 species worldwide. The scientists that study reptiles and amphibians are called herpetologists. Herpetologists work all around the world.

Lizards and snakes are some of natures most amazing creatures. Snakes are mobile creatures that can travel far distances but they do not have legs. Contracting and expanding of muscles allows them to slither from place to place.

Lizards have an amazing built in defense mechanism that allows them to drop their tail if they are threatened by a predator. If a lizard drops its tail it will grow back, but it requires a lot of energy to do so. The tail that regenerates will not look the same, it will be reconstructed only as cartlidge, the bone does not regenerate .

Snakes eat a variety of small mammals, lizards, insects, bird eggs, and kingsnakes will even eat rattlesnakes. Lizards also have a wide variety of meal preferences they like to dine on insects, bird eggs, spiders, the alligator lizard will even eat other lizards.

Wherever you fall in the spectrum from fear to fascination when you encounter these creatures, learning about them and understanding their relationship to the environment is an important step toward appreciating these scaly living dinosaurs.

Western Fence Lizard

Sceloporus occidentalis

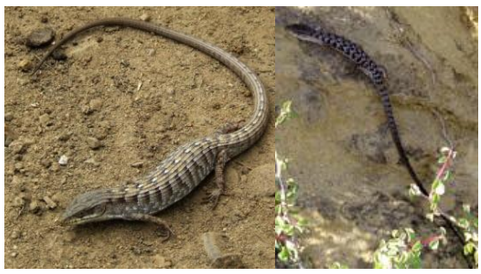
5.7 – 8.9 cm
2.25 – 3.5 inches

This is the most common of all lizards you will see at the park. How many have you already seen today? They like to hang out on rocks, fences and walls soaking up the sun during the day. Reptiles are cold-blooded,or ectothermic meaning they need the warmth of the sun to help them regulate their body temperature. If you see one doing push-ups or bobbing his head around he is not exercising he is defending his territory or tyring to to attract a female lizard.

Alligator Lizard

Elgaria multicarinata

7.3 – 17.8 cm
2.8 – 7 inches

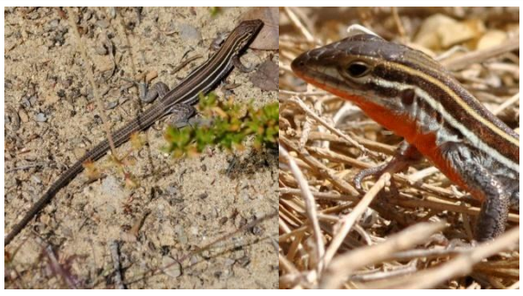


The large head, long pointed snout, powerful jaws and long bodies give this lizard its fierce name. Their tail can grow twice the length of their body if has never been dropped off. When a lizard drops its tail to escape from a predator, the tail will writh on the ground for a few seconds to distract the predator just long enough for the lizard to get away. This lizards tail is prehensile, they use it for support to hang on branches and manuver through brush.

Belding's Orange-Throated Whiptail

Cnemidophorus hyperythrus

5.1 – 7 cm
2 – 2.75 inches



The vibrant orange color on this lizard's throat and often on its chest, along with its stunningly long tail and horizontal stripes make this lizard a remarkable beauty. When defending their territory the male arches his back, twitches and whips the tip of his tail and points his snout at the ground. Once an abundant lizard, their populations are now scattered because much of the habitat they depend on has been destroyed by development.

Western Side-Blotched Lizard

Uta stansburiana

3.8 – 6.3 cm
1.5 – 2.5 inches

The abundance of this lizard, like the fence lizard makes it very likely you will see it in the park.

In the animal kingdom competition for survival and reproduction tends to be more fierce for males than females. This is one of the reasons that males tend to be more colorful and vibrant than their female counterparts. Most lizards can see color and beautiful colors are more attractive and desireable to a prospective mate. Case in point made here for the male side-blotched lizard. Males of this species have blue speckles on their upper surface.This lizard has a relativly short-lived lifespan only lasting about one year.

California Legless Lizard

Anniella pulchra

11 – 17.8 cm
4.3 – 7 inches

A lizard with no legs, WHAT? Well then it must be a snake. No no no, actually this slithery reptile is indeed a lizard. This lizard looks like a snake, and moves like a snake but it is classified by herpetologists as a lizard because it has eyelids. What does a legless lizard say about the evolution of snakes? It still has rudimentary legs, as do some snakes.

These lizards do not lay eggs, they bear live young. Another difference with the legless lizard to other legged lizards is that you will not see them basking in direct sunlight. They live mostly underground and will forage in loose soil, sand, or under leaf debris.

Photos courtesy of Cabrillo National Monument photo database, Emily Floyd, Jeff Nelson, Noel Adams, Chris Brown of USGS, Gary Nafis and californiaherps.com

Southern Pacific Rattlesnake

Crotalus viridis

76 – 112 cm
30 – 44 inches

Rattlesnakes are dangerous; their venom is poisonous to humans. Snakes will most likely see you before you see them and tend to avoid human contact. The rattlesnake when alarmed will shake its tail back and forth to serve as a warning, but they don't have to rattle before striking. The characteristic buzzing sound occurs from the hollow interlocking segments of the rattle when the snake rapidly shakes its tail. A new rattle segment appears every time the snake sheds its skin. Babies are born with only a single button.

Gopher Snake

Pituophis melanoleucus

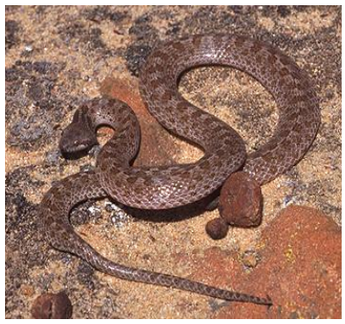
122 – 152 cm
4 – 5 feet

Get to know your snakes because the gopher snake and the rattlesnake are very often confused. They are very similar in pattern and behavior. The gopher snake is known to shake its tail when threatened just like rattlesnakes. One important difference is that gopher snakes are harmless to humans. The main differences between gopher snakes and rattlesnakes are in the body size and shape of their heads. A rattlesnake is a viper and has a triangular shaped head and a black band across the eyes. If you encounter any snake in the park you should always err on the side of caution and leave the snake alone.

Night Snake

Hypsiglena torquata

30 – 60 cm
1 – 2 feet



The night snake also looks similar to a rattlesnake, but they are harmless to humans. When disturbed, the night snake may coil tightly and vibrate their tail just like the gopher snake and mimic the behavior of rattlesnakes. As their name implies the night snake is mainly active at night. Their saliva is mildly venomous, which helps them capture small prey. They normally eat lizards, lizard eggs, small snakes, frogs and toads. All snakes are important to the balance of the ecosystem of the Coastal Sage Scrub habitat found here at Cabrillo National Monument. None of the snakes found here have conservation status issues but it is important to remember that whether they are venomous or harmless to humans, snakes are important predators to the balance of our ecosystem.

Pacific Ring-necked Snake

Diadophis punctatus

20 – 87 cm
8 – 34 inches

Although harmless to humans the ring-necked snake is mildly venomous. They are secretive snakes that hide under rocks and brush so it is very unlikely you will see one at the park. The beautiful red and orange of their under belly is exposed when the snake coils its tail in a spectacular defensive display to warn off predators.

California Kingsnake

Lampropeltis getula

76 – 122 cm
30 – 48 inches

Note the variation in pattern; stripes can be horizontal or vertical.

Kingsnakes' are very powerful predators. They do not use venom. As constrictors they coil tightly around their prey to kill them. The kingsnake is immune to rattlesnake venom and they will also eat rattlesnakes. The high variation in pattern accounts for the variety of difference in appearance.

California Striped Racer

Masticophis lateralis

76 – 122 cm
30 – 48 inches

As their name implies, the California Striped Racer is a very fast moving snake. The racer is also a climber, moving through vegetation, and along rocks. They are very alert and have well developed vision to help them catch prey. The striped racer is not considered dangerous to humans, but if threatened they will strike repeatedly and bite viciously.

Slender Salamander

Batrachoseps pacificus

3.2 – 4.7 cm
1.25 – 1.8 inches

The salamander is the only amphibian you will find at Cabrillo National Monument. Salamanders breathe through their skin and require a very moist environment to thrive. They are sit and wait predators. Salamanders can live for 8-10 years and remain in a small area most their lives rarely going beyond two meters.