White Sands

National Park Service
Department of the Interior
White Sands National Monument

Common Reptiles of White Sands

Many people believe the desert is a barren, dry place with little life. Although deserts usually have a scorching sun and little rain, many animals both live and thrive within White Sands National Monument. The reptiles of White Sands show us their strategies for survival in the most unique desert of all.

Bleached Earless Lizard
Holbrookia maculata ruthveni

At about four inches long, the bleached earless lizard isn't really earless or bleached. Its name comes from the lighter variation of the Common Lesser Earless Lizard. The term "earless" comes from the fact that these lizards do not have external ear openings.

Found throughout the dunefield, these lizards like to bury themselves just under the surface in loose, sandy soil. They are identifiable by two black spots on each side. They feast on a variety of insects and spiders.

Little White Whiptail
Aspidoscelis gypsi

Have you ever seen or experienced adaptation? The image to the left shows how "survival of the fittest" really works! There is some debate whether the little white whiptail (bottom lizard) is its own species or a subspecies of the little striped whiptail lizard (top lizard). Researchers love coming to White Sands to learn about and study the unique species that inhabit the gypsum dunes. The little white whiptail is prey to many birds and mammals. This lizard will detach itself from its tail as an escape strategy.

Southwestern Fence Lizard
Sceleporus cowlesi

Found throughout White Sands, the Southwestern fence lizard can be black to light brown to white, depending on where it's found. Males are easy to identify since they have bright blue belly patches, as well as blue or green chin patches. Although diurnal, this lizard prefers to avoid the mid-day heat of summer and is most active mid-morning and late afternoon. Instead of actively hunting, it sits and waits for prey to wander by. Insects are its favorite meal, but it will eat wasps, spiders, snails, and other small lizards.

Common Side-Blotched Lizard
Uta stansburiana

At about 5.5-inches and found throughout the monument, this is the only lizard at White Sands that is apt to be active on warm days year-round. It is identifiable by a single dark blotch just behind each foreleg. The males roam throughout an area of about 2,500-square yards and can be very territorial, especially during breeding season. This lizard is found in a wide-range all throughout the United States, but varies in coloration and pattern depending on its environment.

To learn more about White Sands, visit http://www.nps.gov/whsa

Coachwhip
Masticophis flagellum

Harmless to humans, the coachwhip is a long, slender tan or brown snake that can reach up to seven feet in length. Most of the coachwhips at White Sands have a pink color on the belly that becomes more pronounced under the tail. This snake shows a nasty temper when capture is attempted. In captivity, while holding its own head still, the coachwhip will whip its tail back and forth around the edges of its cage to dislodge any lizards hiding there. When the lizard moves, it becomes a meal. It is believed the same technique is used in the wild.

Massasauga
Sistrurus catenatus

The desert massasauga is characterized by two white stirpes on its face with brown, dorsal patches outlined in white. The desert massasauga is usually paler than the eastern and western subspecies. When compared to other rattles, the massasauga's is more high-pitched. Although the massasauga can use undulating waves like most snakes, it prefers to move on loose sand by using the "sidewinding" technique. Like most other creatures at White Sands, the massasauga prefers to come out during the cooler times of day.

Sonoran Gopher Snake
Pituophis catenifer affinis

This large, heavy-bodied snake averages about four feet in length but can grow up to seven feet. The underbelly of those in White Sands is often creamy as opposed to yellow, beige, or tan as it is in other areas. A constrictor, the Sonoran gopher snake is harmless to humans and eats small mammals, birds, bird eggs, and even lizards. However, the preferred prey of choice at White Sands is the pocket gopher. A diurnal creature, this snake is most active at dusk and dawn. It prefers to avoid the mid-day heat by hiding in rodent burrows.

Prairie Rattlesnake
Crotalus viridis

Reaching lengths of up to four feet, the prairie rattlesnake is found mostly in desert scrub habitats. Hibernating in winter, prairie rattlers often return to the same den year after year. When awake during warm months, they establish hunting territories and eat mainly lizards and small mammals. This snake can be a variety of colors, such as tan, grey, or olive green. The oval blotches that run down the torso may be clear or indistinct. Due to poor eyesight, prairie rattlesnakes use their forked tongues and heat-sensitive pits to find food.

Western Diamond-backed Rattlesnake
Crotalus atrox

The Western Diamond-backed rattlesnake can range from two to six feet in length! Characterized by the diamond-shaped blotches that run along its torso, this wide-spread rattlesnake can range in color depending on its most common surroundings. The Western Diamond-backed rattlesnake preys on small mammals such as the Apache pocket mouse and prairie gopher. This swift snake quickly responds defensively to any threat by rattling and striking. This snake is identifiable by even-sized black and white bands around the end of the tail.

Desert Box Turtle
Terrapene ornata

Feeding mainly on small insects and sometimes plant matter, the box turtle, inhabits mainly the central portion of the United States in between the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi River. Here at White Sands the subspecies *terrapene ornata luteola,* or the desert box turtle, lives along the edges of the monument's boundaries where Chihuahuan Desert shrub is still predominant. In contrast to the other subspecies, the ornate box turtle, the desert box turtle is more adequately adapted to arid habitats.

Please Note: It is illegal to try to handle wildlife within monument boundaries. If you encounter any wildlife, please stay at a safe distance as some creatures can be dangerous and/or venomous.

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