

Squamata

SERPENTES (Snakes)

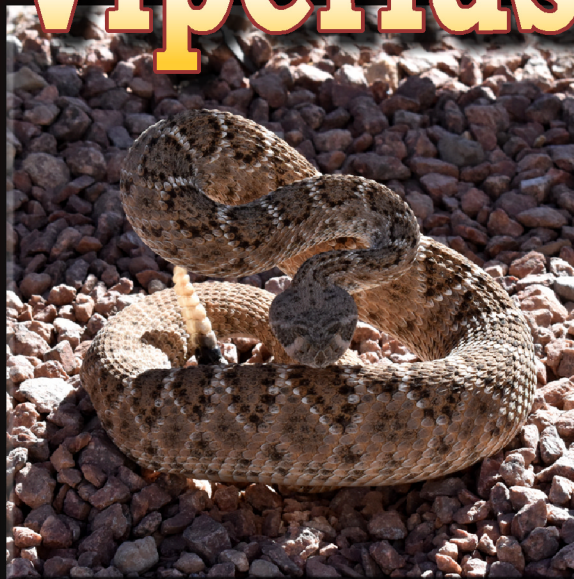
Colubrids



Elapids



Viperids



Family COLUBRIDAE (Colubrid Snakes)

Gopher Snake (*Pituophis catenifer*)

Measurements:

Average Length: 48"

Distinguishing field characteristics:

yellowish-green coloration with distinctive **dark dorsal pattern** (variable between subspecies); unmarked yellowish head, narrower than rattlers

Notes:

common; ranges throughout w US into sw Canada and n Mexico; aka **Bull Snake**; 9 subspecies; non-venomous; one of the longest snakes in the Mojave; diurnal; feeds primarily on small mammals and birds, but will also take lizards and insects

Mojave presence: native

Comments:

Gopher snakes are among the most likely of all snakes one will encounter in the Mojave region. While they are not so common that they're **everywhere**, these large snakes are prevalent enough that if you spend even a modicum of time in the desert, you definitely will encounter one sooner or later...and then you'll start seeing them even more regularly! Though they are non-venomous, "gophers" have been known to behave like rattlers to dissuade uninvited guests from messing with them. To accomplish this feat, they may hiss, strike, or climb into a bush and "rattle" the vegetation by shaking their tail. But have no fear! Gopher snakes are actually good natured and harmless to humans.

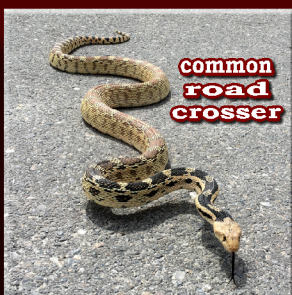
Mojave presence: native



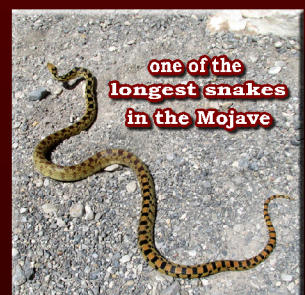
Rocky Gap; RRCNCA; NV



Rocky Gap; RRCNCA; NV



Tecopa Hot Springs, CA



Tecopa Hot Springs, CA



Scenic Loop; Red Rock Cyn NCA



Red Spring; Red Rock Cyn NCA



Moapa Valley; Clark Co., NV

Family COLUBRIDAE

(Colubrid Snakes)

Coachwhip (*Masticophis flagellum*)

Measurements:

Average Length: 60"

Distinguishing field characteristics:

thin, generally **reddish body** (variable) with a braided-looking pattern that gives rise to its name; small head with large dark eyes

Notes:

common; diurnal, even on hot days, thus likely to be encountered; ranges throughout southern US and northern Mexico; one of the longest snakes in the Mojave region, and the fastest (earning the apropos nickname, **Red Racer**); non-venomous, but can deliver a potentially painful bite that can become infected (like any wound); preys on lizards, birds, small mammals, even insects and other snakes

Mojave presence: native

Comments:

This snake is common and very likely to be encountered eventually. However, it is so wary and fast that it is usually gone before you can even process what you just saw! I got lucky with the two pictured above. The one on the **Hualapai Reservation** in May of 2019 was trying to find refuge under a bush, and being cornered, had nowhere else to go. Likewise, the one at the **Visitor Center** in the **Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area** west of Las Vegas also found itself in a predicament as it got trapped in the tortoise habitat. Focused on getting out, it paid no attention to me, which allowed for an easy photoshoot. In most cases, though, encounters are so brief and swift that you don't even have time to raise your camera to get a shot. Until the two instances above, I had a tough time getting good shots--or any photos at all--of a rather common species in the desert. Very frustrating! More often than not, you just see a blur race across the road or landscape. Per example, I was at **Kelso Dunes** in the **Mojave National Preserve** in November of 2020 searching for the rare **Mojave Fringe-Toed Lizard** *Uma scoparia* to photograph when I unexpectedly encountered a coachwhip that raced straight across at my feet. I had the wrong camera in hand (big lens for long-distance shots); by the time I grabbed the camera with a shorter lens that I had slung across my shoulder, the snake was long gone into a rodent hole! I was right there! With the wrong camera! Damn! At least I eventually **did** get my good shots.



Dolan Springs, AZ



Red Rock Cyn NCA; Nevada



Hualapai Reservation; AZ



Red Rock Cyn NCA; Nevada

Family COLUBRIDAE

(Colubrid Snakes)

California Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis californiae*)

Measurements:

Average Length: 36"

Distinguishing field characteristics:

highly variable coloration and patterns, but usually distinctive **black** (desert) or **brown** (coastal) and **white** bands that encircle the body; small, rounded head with black crown and white face

Notes:

common, but mostly nocturnal, so rarely encountered (diurnally active on cooler days); occurs from sw OR, throughout most of CA, east into NV and AZ, and south into nw Mexico; name derived from a propensity to prey on other snakes (including rattlesnakes!); non-venomous; eats rodents, birds, and reptiles

Mojave presence: native

Comments:

Though generally common as a species, kingsnakes are mostly nocturnal, thus seldom encountered. The fact is, I've lived in and explored the Mojave for over forty years, and never once did I cross paths with a specimen until May of 2022 in Dolan Springs, Arizona! If you are among the lucky few who happen to be in the right place at the right time, these long, slender, well-camouflaged snakes (left) are easy to identify by their distinctive banding (usually black and white, though the "coastal" variety replaces



Red Spg; RRCNCA; NV



Dolan Springs, Arizona



Dolan Springs, Arizona



Dolan Springs, Arizona



Dolan Springs, Arizona

brown for black). However, some have no banding at all, which makes identification a bit more challenging. In such case, the small tapered head distinguishes it from the venomous vipers whose heads are profoundly triangular in shape. While coral snakes also have small, rounded heads, their band colors and arrangement are quite different. Rest assured, kingsnakes are non-venomous, docile, and easy to handle (right), which explains why they are among the most popular snakes kept as pets.

Family COLUBRIDAE (Colubrid Snakes)

Long-Nosed Snake (*Rhinocheilus lecontei*)

Measurements:

Average Length: 36"

Distinguishing field characteristics:

namesake **long snout**; narrow tapered head; tricolored orange-red and black saddling on back; yellowish and black mottling on sides and head; **red eyes**

Notes:

common, but mostly nocturnal, so rarely encountered (diurnally burrowed underground, though active on cooler days); prefers gravelly soil in desert scrub and grassland environments from lowland CA east to OK/TX (isolated population in ID), south into MEX; non-venomous; differs from all other non-venomous snakes in US by undivided **subcaudal scales** (ventral post-anal plates); eats lizards, frogs, small snakes, eggs, and occasionally rodents

Mojave presence: native

Comments:

Like the **California Kingsnake** *Lampropeltis californiae* (previous page), the long nosed is a generally common species, but since it is primarily a nocturnal reptile, people seldom encounter it. Consequently, this specimen is the first--and so far only one--I've encountered as of September, 2022, in Dolan Springs, Arizona! If you are lucky enough to actually come across one, the snake is easy to identify if you know what to look for. At first glance, it may be

mistaken for a young **Gopher Snake** *Pituophis catenifer* (page 2) due to a superficially similar pattern, though gophers lack any red coloration. However, youngsters generally have no banding at all, which makes them look more like some kingsnakes. Also note the distinctive **red eyes**! In any case, long noseds are completely harmless, docile, and easy to handle (rarely even attempting to bite), as demonstrated by my reluctant neighbor, Chris (right), who wasn't totally convinced at first--despite my assurances!



typical pattern

Dolan Springs, Arizona



to 3 feet in length

Dolan Springs, Arizona



likes gravelly soils

Dolan Springs, Arizona



long nose; red eyes

Dolan Springs, Arizona



blends with habitat

Dolan Springs, Arizona



very docile nature

Dolan Springs, Arizona

Family COLUBRIDAE (Colubrid Snakes)

Glossy Snake (*Arizona elegans*)

Measurements:

Average Length: 4"

Distinguishing field characteristics:

slender body, tan with brown bands/spots on dorsal side, pale below; narrow, pointed head with sharp snout; distinctive **brown band** between and extending through dark eyes; large, round pupils; **glossy**, unkeeled scales

Notes:

common, but mostly nocturnal (though diurnal in cooler months), thus seldom encountered; prefers loose to sandy soils in desert scrub and grassland environments from s CA east to KS, south into MEX; non-venomous; 8 subspecies; aka **Faded Snake**; eats mainly small lizards, but also small mammals, snakes, birds, etc.

Mojave presence: native

Comments:

Although these docile snakes (left) can grow to 5 feet or so, they are usually much smaller. I encountered the subspecies shown here, a **Desert Glossy Snake** *Arizona elegans eburnata*, on a pleasant night in May of 2023 near Dolan Springs, AZ. It was only about 1.5 feet in total length--no doubt a youngster! Thus far it is the only member of the species I have encountered. While it can be confused with a number of other species in the Mojave region, note the dark band between and extending through the eyes (right)--its telltale characteristic.



Dolan Springs, Arizona



Dolan Springs, Arizona



Dolan Springs, Arizona



Dolan Springs, Arizona



very docile nature



dark face band

Family VIPERIDAE (Vipers)

Mohave Rattlesnake (*Crotalus scutulatus*)

Measurements:

Average Length: 53"

Distinguishing field characteristics:

olive-green coloration, thus "Mohave Green" nickname (but also brown and yellowish); wide triangular head; rattle on tail; brownish, well-defined, **oval-shaped patterns** on back **lined in yellowish green**; dark **facial mask** with pale borders

Notes:

common, but seldom seen; mainly nocturnal to crepuscular; found throughout the Mojave, eastward to w Texas, south into Sonoran Desert of Mexico; world's most toxic rattlesnake venom; named not for the Mojave Desert, but derived from the Navajo language, thus "Mohave"; preys mainly on small mammals, birds, lizards

Mojave presence: native



Red Rock Cyn NCA; NV



Red Rock Cyn NCA; NV



Red Rock Cyn NCA; NV



Red Rock Cyn NCA; NV

Special Note on Desert Rattlesnakes in General:

Whatever you think you've learned about rattlesnakes from books, internet, Western movies. . . I guarantee you the information was woefully misleading, inaccurate, and totally lacking in any personal experience! First, rattlesnakes are **not** dangerous--**humans** are dangerous! Desert rattlers will **never** attack or even approach you. Though most will retreat, some--like the **Western Diamondback Crotalus atrox** (page 9)--will stand their ground, but that is not **aggression** (it's purely defensive). Second, many will not even employ their rattles, but rather remain silent to allow you to pass; rattling gives away their presence, which is risky for the snakes! Third, a rattler can only strike within a distance of about a third of its body length. Thus, a 3-footer (typical of desert rattlesnakes) will only strike if you get within a foot of it, and even then many strikes are dry--no venom is injected. Venom is too precious a commodity. Water is needed to produce venom, and water is scarce in a desert (most is obtained from prey animals). If the snake wastes its venom on you, it may not be able to eat for an extended period of time--a life-or-death scenario!

I have schooled multitudes of wary tourists, trekkers, off-roaders, etc., who have encountered rattlers while with me on a hike, tour, or field trip. I tell them what I'm going to do and how the snake will respond. Invariably, the same scene plays out over and over again without surprise. I'll get everyone--even those who claimed to be petrified of snakes--to within a couple feet of the animal to snap their own pictures face on! No strikes, no heart attacks, no incidents of any kind--just a great lifetime experience. You won't get that from Wikipedia!

Family VIPERIDAE (Vipers)

Panamint Rattlesnake (*Crotalus stephensi*)

Measurements:

Length: 48"

Distinguishing field characteristics:

tan coloration with well-defined **brown blotches on back** that reach the sides (highly variable color and pattern); wide triangular head with **blue-gray mask** on face; muted pattern of drkk, irregular bands on tail, **black at base** of rattle

Notes:

common, but seldom encountered; found in canyons, rocky environments in the Mojave Desert north of the **Mojave National Preserve**; coils in tight defensive posture when approached; escapes when allowed, not aggressive; mostly nocturnal and crepuscular, but these specimens were encountered mid day during springtime; preys on small mammals, birds, lizards

Mojave presence: native

Comments:

When I first encountered this species, I mistook it for the **Speckled Rattlesnake** *Crotalus mitchellii*, which is very similar and inhabits the same type of environment, but with little overlap in range. The speckled and panamint are easily confused, so I excuse myself for such an error. Alas, I'm not the only one! In fact, many authors have made the same mistake. Case in point: in the *Red Rock Canyon Visitor Guide*, it's stated that the speckled is "the most frequently seen rattlesnake at Red Rock." However, this species' range is well south/west of the conservation area. While some speckles may wander into the area, the only rattlers I've ever seen in my 40+ years of exploring **Red Rock Canyon NCA** (well before it became an "amusement park" for the mass influx of new residents since about the early 2000s) are occasional Mojave greens and the much-more-prevalent panamints!



irregular, dark bands...

Goodsprings, Nevada



...that extend down sides

Goodsprings, Nevada



coloration typically matches terrain

Red Rock Cyn NCA; NV



peek-a-boo from a Giant Four-o-Clock

Red Rock Cyn NCA; NV



blue-gray mask



black base of rattle



typical 3-4 feet long



distinct dorsal pattern

Family VIPERIDAE (Vipers)

Western Diamondback (*Crotalus atrox*)

Measurements:

Average Length: 48"

Distinguishing field characteristics:

tan to brown colored, granular pigmentation similar to **Speckled Rattlesnake** *Crotalus mitchellii*; wide triangular head; dark, diamond-shaped patterns on back; distinct **black-and-white bands** on tail, complete from vent to rattle (unlike **Mohave Rattlesnake**)

Notes:

relatively common, but seldom encountered; nocturnal and crepuscular; ranges from s CA south into MEX, and east as far as east-central AR; males can be much larger than females; rears up in defense when threatened (rather than coil like most rattlers); preys mainly on small mammals, but also takes lizards and birds

Mojave presence: native; extreme eastern areas

Comments:

Western diamondbacks are certainly among the more common rattlesnakes to be encountered in the eastern part of the Mojave Desert. Having said that, Dolan Springs, AZ, is thus far the only locale where I have actually seen them. The one above planted himself right in front of the door into Dolan Springs Station, a local trading post, in May of 2018. I let him show off for a while (long enough to get some great shots), then coaxed him into a trash can and released him into the nearby desert brush.

I encountered the ones below while exploring a wash with a couple of friends in March, 2022. Being early in the season, we did not expect to see any rattlesnakes. This adventurous couple found the weather particularly suited to their liking and were out exploring (or taking care of other business!) when we happened upon them unannounced, which they weren't too happy about, as you can imagine. "Something-something interruptus"--you know how annoying that can be!

I didn't know it at the time, but Tony wears hearing aids, which he wasn't wearing that day! Needless to say, our encounter with the rattlers could have had a bad outcome. Tony was the closest to the snakes, but he couldn't hear their warnings! We were waving at him to stop, and fortunately he saw us before taking another step. The lesson here, of course, which I never would have thought of before, is that if you use hearing aids, make sure to wear them while hiking in the desert...especially if hiking alone!



Dolan Springs, AZ



Dolan Springs, AZ



Dolan Springs, AZ



Dolan Springs, AZ



wear your hearing aids, Tony!

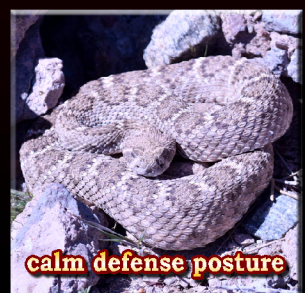


a tale of two tails

Se9



fearsome twosome



calm defense posture

Family VIPERIDAE (Vipers)

Sidewinder (*Crotalus cerastes*)

Measurements:

Average Length: 24"

Distinguishing field characteristics:

raised supraocular scales above eyes resemble horns; light body color overlain with darker elliptical blotches; small triangular head

Notes:

common, though seldom encountered; found in sandy desert scrubland in s NV and far sw UT, west into CA, south through sw AZ into far nw Mexico; mostly nocturnal, though diurnal during cooler months; juveniles feast on insects, while adults prefer small mammals; females larger than males, though still small as a species compared to other rattlers; name derived from its sideways means of locomotion; preys on small lizards, mammals, birds, etc.

Mojave presence: native

Comments:

Here is yet another example of a common animal that people seldom encounter. You often see evidence of their recent presence--distinctive "J-shaped" tracks in the sand--but rarely the animal itself, since it is mostly nocturnal. While dry, sandy substrate is their preferred habitat (such as sand dunes), I encountered my first, and so far only, sidewinder in the gravelly, riparian Salt Creek area of Death Valley National Park in April of 2018 (pictured above), ironically in the middle of the day. It was on the bank of the stream (yes, there are streams that arise from springs in Death Valley), somewhat in the open until it saw me coming. Then it slithered for refuge under a small foot bridge where I was able to get these shots.

Even on rare occasions when sidewinders risk a daytime venture, they are small vipers that are easily overlooked. That's why one should take special care with each footstep while hiking in the desert, regardless of what kind of misfortune one may encounter.



Salt Creek; Death Valley NP



Salt Creek; Death Valley NP



Salt Creek; Death Valley NP



Salt Creek; Death Valley NP