



Klamath Network Featured Creature

March 2013

Western Fence Lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis*)

General Description:

Western Fence Lizards are very “spiny” looking – they have overlapping, pointed scales on their backs and limbs. Their dorsal coloration tends to match the ground cover in their surroundings and thus ranges from shades of gray to tan or brown and has blotches or wavy dark lines. Adult males also usually have distinctive belly and throat patches that can be a very vivid blue color.

Described as a medium-sized lizard, adults are usually about 15 cm (6 inches) in total length (the tail is 1.5 times the length of the body, unless it is regenerating after being detached).

Diet:

Grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, ants, wasps, aphids and some spiders are among its favorite prey.

Behavior:

As temperatures get warmer in the Klamath Network region, these lizards will come out more and more frequently to bask in the sun. You may see them doing vigorous push-ups as you approach a rock or log that they are on. These push-ups are used by male lizards to court females and warn other males that they are encroaching on inhabited territory.

Western Fence Lizards are probably the most commonly seen lizard in our region because they perch on things that allow them to view and protect their territories (and also to warm themselves in the sun). This also makes them rather easy prey to spot for predators such as raptors, snakes and shrews.



http://serpenttrack.com/herps/misc_field_herps/lizards/

Behavior (continued):

As a result, the lizards stay near things that they can hide under and rely on very quick reflexes to escape from attack. The length of the lizard's tail also makes it probable that a predator will get a hold of that before the main body. Then the tail detaches easily, which will often distract the predator as well as allowing the lizard to scamper away.

Reproduction and Development:

Breeding season typically begins in April, but is somewhat dependent on climate and geography. After being internally fertilized by a male lizard, females dig a pit and lay about 8 eggs (range 3-17) into it and then cover them with loose soil. Eggs hatch in about 2 months. Baby lizards are about 2 inches in total length. In the spring of their second year, young lizards are capable of breeding.

Fence Lizards Can Defeat Lyme disease!

A protein in the Fence Lizard's blood kills the bacterium that causes Lyme disease. So when a tick feeds on these lizards' blood (which they commonly do), it cleanses the tick so that it no longer carries the disease.

Habitat and Distribution:

The Western Fence Lizard occupies a wide range of habitats, from desert canyons and grasslands to coniferous forests. It just requires structures such as rock piles or logs for shelter, sun bathing, and a good look-out.

These lizards are distributed throughout the Western United States west of the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Coast and south to Baja California. They are only absent from the most arid deserts of southeastern California and Arizona.

In the Klamath Network Parks:

On a sunny summer day, if you're an observant hiker, you might be fortunate enough to see *Sceloporus occidentalis* along roads and trails in any of the Klamath Network parks.

References:

- California Academy of Sciences.
Lizards That Fight Lyme Disease.
http://www.calacademy.org/science_now/archive/wild_lives/fence_lizards_050601.php
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