Sagebrush Lizard

Sceloporus graciosus

July 2016

Field Notes

Sagebrush lizard. Photo courtesy Steve Harbula, Creative Commons.

General Description

Often found scampering around in sagebrush habitat, the aptly named sagebrush lizard is a common inhabitant of the arid West. Members of the genus *Sceloporus* are also known as the "spiny" lizards for the ridged and "spiny" scales on their backs. The sagebrush lizard is active during the day (diurnal), and reaches 15 cm (6 in) from its snout to the tip of its tail.

Identification

The sagebrush lizard's gray or tan back sports a lighter stripe down the center and on both sides. The "armpit" area often reveals a rust or orange patch, and a dark bar may be present on the shoulder. When pregnant, the adult female's neck and sides can be tinted yellow or orange. Bright blue patches on the sides of the adult male's belly, along with lighter blue streaking on his throat are displayed to females during courtship.

Male sagebrush lizard. Photo: Erika Nowak.

Distinguishing the sagebrush lizard from its common cousin, the western fence lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis*) can be tricky. Both species have blue belly patches and are similar in size, but the sagebrush lizard has smaller and finer scales, and males have a less distinct blue patch on the throat. It lacks the yellow coloring seen on the back of the western fence lizard's legs, and typically occurs at higher elevations than its cousin.

Common sagebrush lizard (left) basking next to western fence lizard (right). Photo courtesy Gary Nafis, californiaherps.com.

Habitat and Diet

The sagebrush lizard occurs throughout the western United States at elevations of 150 to 3200 m (500 to 10,500 ft). The best place to find these lizards is in sagebrush cover, although they also inhabit other types of shrublands, and even openly wooded pinyon-juniper or forest. Nimble climbers and jumpers, they live on the ground, near bushes, logs, rocks or brush piles. These features provide basking surfaces as well as cover. Sagebrush lizards are also known to seek shelter in rodent burrows.

They eat a variety of invertebrates, including ants, beetles, flies, spiders, mites, ticks, and bees. Conversely, sagebrush lizards are eaten by snakes, such as the striped whipsnake and night snake, as well as birds and other predators.

Life History

Sagebrush lizards emerge from hibernation in the spring. They lay a clutch of 2–7 eggs between May and July, buried in loose soil underneath shrubs. The young hatch 45–75 days later. Most females produce 2 clutches per year.

Fun Facts

—Being ectotherms, lizards get their heat from external sources, like sunlight and warm rocks. The skin color for many, including the sagebrush lizard, is darker when cold and lightens up with increasing heat.

—To save its life, the sagebrush lizard can lose its tail to an attacker, a behavior known as autotomy. The predator is temporarily distracted by a thrashing—and edible—body part, which gives the lizard time to escape. The lizard can grow the tail back, but the original vertebrae are replaced by a rod of cartilage.

Where to See

You can find sagebrush lizards in most of the Klamath Network parks, including Lassen Volcanic, Crater Lake, Lava Beds, and Whiskeytown.

References and Further Reading

http://www.californiaherps.com/

Encyclopedia of Life:
http://eol.org/pages/790737/details#physical_description

NatureServe Explorer:
http://explorer.natureserve.org/servlet/NatureServe?searchSciOrCommonName=sagebrush+lizard&x=0&y=0

The Reptile Database:
http://reptile-database.reptarium.cz/species?genus=Sceloporus&species=graciosus