



Volume 30/Issue 8

Sagebrush Lizard

April 2017

# SAGEBRUSH LIZARD

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# SAGEBRUSH LIZARD

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**W**hat is the most common lizard on Idaho's sagebrush plains? It is the sagebrush lizard!

As you have probably figured out, the sagebrush lizard likes habitats with sagebrush and other shrubs. It may also be found in wooded areas with juniper, pines or Douglas-fir trees. They like to bask in the sun on rocks or logs.

Some people call sagebrush lizards "blue-bellies." Mature males have two bright blue patches on their bellies. Females and immature males have white or cream colored bellies. The tops of sagebrush lizards are covered in small, gray or tan spiny scales. They often have light colored stripes running down the back and may have tinges of orange or yellow along the neck and sides. The average length of a sagebrush lizard is about six inches, but more than half of that length is tail! Their bodies are only around two and one-half inches long. Males are a bit larger than females.

Like all reptiles, temperature and climate often determine when these lizards are scampering about. If it is too cold or too hot, they will burrow in the dirt. An old abandoned ground squirrel hole is a nice place for them to wait out the weather. They are most active between April and September.

Male sagebrush lizards have blue belly patches for a reason. They stakeout territories and warn other males to stay away. When another male is near, they climb up on a rock and do push-ups

showing off the blue patches. This is a warning to back off and leave.

The blue patches may also help to get the attention of a passing female. Males put on a show by bobbing their heads and shaking their bodies. Sagebrush lizards mate in the spring. In June, females lay four to seven eggs in loose soil under a shrub. If conditions are good, females may lay two clutches of eggs. Tiny, one-inch hatchlings emerge in August.

Sagebrush lizards eat mostly insects. Ants, beetles and flies are favorites. They may also eat spiders and ticks. Their biggest predators are snakes, especially whipsnakes and night snakes. Hawks and other birds may also eat sagebrush lizards.

Keep a sharp eye out for sagebrush lizards this spring and summer. They are a bit skittish. When they notice movement, they scamper down burrows or between rocks or logs. If you see a sagebrush lizard, quietly sit down and be still. It may take some time, but your patience may be rewarded by the reappearance of this special little reptile.



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# REPTILES

When you think of a reptile, you may think of a snake or lizard. Maybe a turtle pops into your mind. People often think of reptiles as scaly, cold-blooded animals that usually lay eggs.

Some scientists that group, or classify, animals are starting to look at reptiles a bit differently. Some divide reptiles into four groups. The first group includes turtles. The second group is lizards and snakes; the third group would be crocodiles and their relatives. The last group is the birds!

Some scientists put birds in this group because bird skulls and eggs are so similar to those of reptiles. These scientists believe the similarities between bird skulls and eggs and reptile skulls and eggs are more important than the differences between the two. They are not as

concerned about the fact that birds are warm-blooded, and all other reptiles are cold-blooded. Believe it or not, when we look at the cells of crocodiles, birds, and lizards, crocodiles actually have more in common with birds than they do with lizards. You may be wondering about the feathers on birds. They don't look much like scales, but they really are scales that have changed over time to help birds fly. What do you think? Do you think birds should be in the reptile group? More evidence may be needed before a clear answer is reached.

For now, let's leave birds out of the reptile group and take a closer look at what makes a reptile a reptile. You can find reptiles living on every continent except Antarctica. Most reptiles have a hard time staying warm. They can't make heat inside their bodies, so Antarctica would just be a giant freezer and graveyard for them. It is too cold! Since Idaho has pretty cold winters, we don't have as many reptiles as some other states. We have one turtle, 10 lizards and 13 snakes.

Most reptiles lay eggs but not all. In Idaho, we have two lizards, the alligator lizard and the short-horned lizard, that give birth to live young. We also have four snakes that give birth to live young, the rubber boa, western rattlesnake, common garter snake and terrestrial garter snake.

Reptiles are covered by a thick skin protected by scales. Scales are similar to your fingernails. They are made up of dead cells and form a kind of tough armor around the body. Scales offer protection from the sun and help reptiles retain water in their bodies. Lizards and snakes have scales on their bodies, and turtles have scales on their shells.

Reptiles come in all shapes and sizes. They can be really big. Saltwater crocodiles can grow to be over 23 feet long. Other reptiles are small. A gecko that lives on the British Virgin Islands is less than an inch long! Reptiles may come in different shapes, sizes and live in many different habitats. One thing they all have in common is they are all interesting creatures!



# DO LIZARDS — REALLY HAVE — COLD BLOOD?



If you hear an animal is cold-blooded, does that mean the animal's blood is actually cold? Well, not really. It means they are the same temperature as their surroundings. If a lizard is lying on sand that is 60 degrees, the lizard will also be 60 degrees. Snakes, lizards, turtles, insects, fish and frogs are all cold-blooded animals.

Some people call cold-blooded animals ectothermic (ek-to-THER-mik) animals. Ecto means outside, and therm means heat. Ectothermic animals get heat from outside their bodies. You may also hear people call them poikilotherms (poy-KEE-lo-therms). This is just a fancy word for a cold-blooded animal.

Cold-blooded animals are most active in warm weather. Cold weather slows down their muscles. That's why cold-blooded animals lay or bask in the sun. The sun helps to warm them up. If they get too warm, they need to move to a shady spot or go in a burrow. Colder weather can kill cold-blooded animals. They need to migrate to warmer places or move underground. Some cold-blooded animals, like bees and dragonflies, shiver to stay warm.

Cold-blooded animals have a real advantage in deserts. Deserts are warmer, and food is often harder to find. Cold-blooded animals don't need to eat as much as warm-blooded animals. Sometimes they can go months between meals. This is why you often see more cold-blooded animals living in deserts than warm-blooded animals.

Calling an animal cold-blooded may be a bit confusing. Next time you are talking about a cold-blooded animal, how about calling it an ectothermic animal or a poikilotherm? You may teach others a new word and teach them the true meaning of the term "cold-blooded."



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# CLEAVER DEFENSES

Can you think of an animal that has a clever way of protecting itself? Animals may use color, armor, or even poison to protect themselves.

Sagebrush lizards have a few ways to protect themselves. One thing they do is move quickly. If danger appears to be near, they run as fast as they can for cover. Another thing they might try is to freeze or play dead. The mottled colors of sagebrush lizards help them to camouflage or hide against the ground.

Turtles use armor. Turtle shells are made of bone, and the outside is covered with scales called scutes. Scutes are made of the same thing as your fingernails, something called keratin. Keratin is hard and tough and helps to protect the shell from weather. The patterns and colors on the scutes also help camouflage the turtle. If camouflage doesn't protect the turtle, it can seek protection inside its shell. Turtles' necks are very flexible, and the skin around the neck is loose. This allows the turtle to pull its whole neck inside the shell when danger is near. Most turtles fold their necks in an "S" shape inside the shell. It is very difficult for a predator to get a turtle out of its shell.

Some lizards also have armor. Horned lizards come to mind. They are covered by sharp, pointy scales. Horned lizards have another way to protect themselves. They can squirt blood out of the corner of their eyes! The blood may go as far as three feet. This definitely will startle a predator!

Poison is a good defense, too. Sometimes an animal might not look dangerous. Many frogs, toads and salamanders have glands on them that make poison. If they aren't poisonous, they may taste awful. Poisonous animals are sometimes bright and colorful. Their bright colors are a warning to stay away.

Think of a skunk. The stripes on a skunk are a warning to stay away, and boy, do they smell bad! Once an animal has had a run-in with a skunk, it most likely won't get too close to a skunk again. Can you think of other clever ways animals protect themselves? There are just about as many clever defenses as there are animals.

# Do Lizards Make Good Pets?



Lizards, frogs, snakes and turtles are such interesting animals. Many people would like to keep them as pets, but keeping these animals as pets may cause problems.

Some reptiles and amphibians are bred in cages and are meant to be pets. Others are taken out of the wild. One frog that has been hurt a lot by the pet trade is the endangered painted burrowing frog in Madagascar. Thousands of frogs have been collected to sell as pets. So many have been taken that there are not enough frogs left in the wild to breed and replace the ones taken. People are trying to breed these frogs in cages. If they can breed the frogs in captivity, then maybe people will leave the wild frogs alone.

Although it may seem fun to keep lizards as pets, it can be tricky keeping them alive. Animals have specially adapted bodies to live in their unique habitats. It is hard to recreate an ecosystem in a cage. Lizards are sensitive animals. It is important that they have the proper temperature and humidity to be healthy. The smallest change in their habitat can have life threatening effects.

There's no change greater than being taken from the wild and put in a cage!

Idaho has laws about keeping reptiles and amphibians as pets. All Idaho reptiles and

amphibians (except bullfrogs) are protected. Check with Idaho Fish and Game to understand the rules before your family decides to capture and keep a lizard as a pet.

The place for Idaho's wild animals is in the wild. This is best for lizards and will help ensure Idaho has healthy lizards for years to come.



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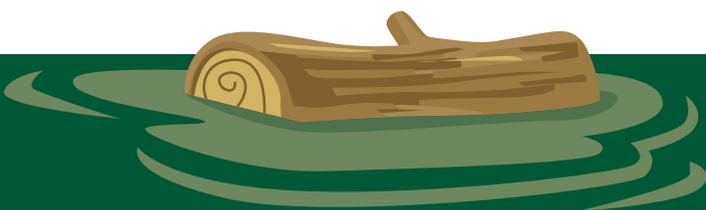
# Go Herping!

**H**ave you ever heard of herpetology? In Greek, herp means creeping, so herpetology is the study of creeping things. It is the study of reptiles and amphibians. Many people just call them “herps” for short.

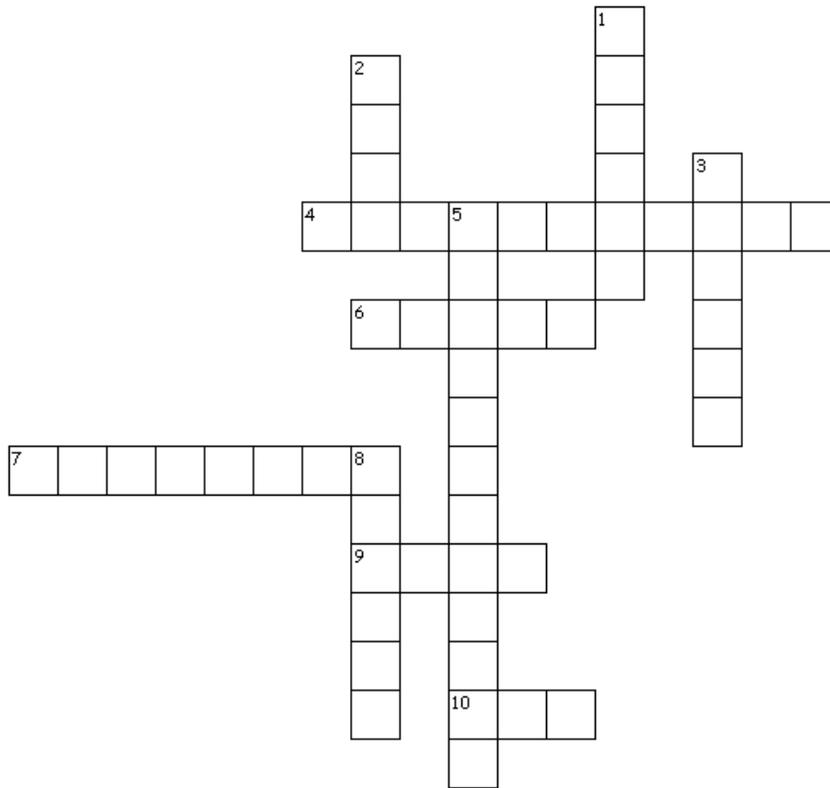
It is fun to look for amphibians and reptiles and learn about what they need to survive. If you want to go “herping” and look for reptiles or amphibians, here are some things to keep in mind. You are more likely to see an amphibian or reptile in the spring during breeding seasons. Use a good sturdy stick to flip things over. Many herps hide under rocks, logs and leaves, so looking under things is a good place to start. Look for amphibians when the sun is going down and at night; reptiles are usually seen during the day.

If you would like to get a closer look at an amphibian or reptile, place the animal in a clear plastic box. Amphibians will probably need a bit of water in the box. Herps can bite! Use a net and wear thick leather gloves when handling animals and never handle a rattlesnake. Once you are done looking at your herp, put it back where you found it.

Herpetology can be fun! Read books and watch videos to learn more about amphibians and reptiles. Then go exploring and look for herps around your neighborhood.



# Sagebrush Lizard Criss-Cross Puzzle



- | Words        |
|--------------|
| Ants         |
| Blue         |
| Burrow       |
| Common       |
| Herpetology  |
| Poikilotherm |
| Reptiles     |
| Run          |
| Snakes       |
| Spiny        |

## Across

- The study of creeping things.
- Sagebrush lizards have \_\_\_\_\_ scales.
- Lizards are \_\_\_\_\_.
- A favorite food of sagebrush lizards.
- Sagebrush lizards \_\_\_\_\_ fast to protect themselves.

## Down

- To avoid the cold winter, sagebrush lizards \_\_\_\_\_ underground.
- This color is found on the bellies of male sagebrush lizards.
- Sagebrush lizards are the most \_\_\_\_\_ lizard in Idaho's sagebrush plains.
- Another word for cold-blooded animal.
- The biggest predators of sagebrush lizards.

## WILDLIFE EXPRESS

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

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