



## Desert Chuckwalla

Kingdom: Animalia  
 Phylum: Chordata  
 Subphylum: Vertebrata  
 Class: Reptilia  
 Order: Squamata  
 Family: Iguanidae  
 Genus: *Sauromalus*  
 Species: *obesus obesus*



Photo courtesy of Karen Marzynski

### Habitat

- **In the Wild:** This species of desert chuckwalla, the western chuckwalla, is found in rocky desert areas, lava flows, hillsides, and outcrops in Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah, and northern Baja California.
- **Exhibit Location:** USS Antiquities (Desert Exhibit); Zoo to You Collection

### Characteristics

- Chuckwallas can reach a length of 16 inches, almost half of which is its tail. It can weigh from 9.9-13 ounces. Males are larger than females.
- There is a lot of color variation in both sexes and the color can change with temperature, surroundings and mood. The tail on males is unmarked and lightly colored. Females and young have light crossbands on their bodies and tails. Their tails are thick at the base and taper toward the tip.
- They are rather pot-bellied and baggy in appearance, with loose folds of skin around the neck, shoulders, and abdomen. Their legs are short; hind limbs are longer than the forelimbs. Scales on the body are small with those on the tail being the largest.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** 15 years; **In Captivity** 25 years

### Behaviors

- Chuckwallas are diurnal, being active during the day. In the morning they bask to warm up, and then start searching for food.
- They are rather timid and solitary, basking in elevated positions so they can survey their surroundings.
- During the hottest and coldest parts of the day, they hang out in rocky crevices and are inactive for weeks or months at a time during the summer when food supplies are scarce (aestivation).
- When pursued, they retreat into a crevice and wedge themselves in by inflating their lungs with air, making extraction by predators difficult.
- Males establish territories that they defend against other males.
- From November – March, when the weather turns rather cold, they go into brumation, which is similar to hibernation, but with periods of wakefulness.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** dandelion and other yellow edible flowers, rearrangement of enclosure furniture

### Reproduction

- The chuckwalla reaches sexual maturity between 3-4 years of age.
- Field studies indicate that females may not breed each year. They may breed in years of heavy rainfall that are preceded by a year of moderate rainfall.
- Mating occurs in late spring. Shady, well-drained soil is needed for nests.
- There are 5-16 eggs that are laid underground in early summer. The gestation period is 72 days.

## Diet

- **In the Wild:** variety of plants, leaves, buds, flowers, fruits, occasionally insects
- **At the Zoo:** herp herbs, various greens, carrots, bean sprouts, fruit, yellow flowers

## Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** not listed; **CITES Appendix:** not listed
- The chuckwalla is not in danger of extinction. However, excessive habitat degradation locally threatens some populations. Their habitat makes hunting for the pet trade difficult.
- National Parks offer protection in some places where their habitats are located.
- Predators: hawks, coyotes

## Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- Chuckwallas are not common in the pet trade.
- Chuckwallas do not drink water directly from a water source, but get most of their liquid from their food. They will drink from puddles after a storm.
- They were a favorite food of local Indians.

## Sources:

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