



This little fellow came to visit me at the rifle range. He is a prime example of a Colorado whiptail. (Submitted/Mark Rackay)

Lizards among us

My first memorable experience with a lizard goes back to my fishing days in the Florida Keys. It was during the predawn darkness that I was loading the boat with tackle, cast nets, and other assorted toys necessary for a day of backcountry fishing.

It was already hot outside, and the humidity was so thick that fish swam in the air. We purposely did the readying of the boat without use of any light, because even the smallest amount of light would attract a squadron of the Florida state bird, the mosquito.

As I stepped onto the dock in the darkness, something hissed at me. I froze and looked around in the darkness, myself being unaccustomed to being “hissed” at on my own dock. I grabbed a small flashlight out of the console of the boat and went searching for the maker of the “hiss.” I found it.

At first, I thought it was an alligator, with those red eyes shining back at me. After my heart rate returned to a safer level of tachycardia, I realized it was an iguana, all 5 feet of one. Apparently, my stumbling around in the darkness disturbed him although he had little concern for what his discovery did to me and my cardiovascular system.

Iguanas are generally harmless, except for the hissing and fear factor. They come from Central America and are considered an invasive species. The interlopers came here as pets and escaped, or inadvertently on ships, and have begun to flourish. Pythons are another species that has invaded Florida.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Between the two of them, it was time for me to get back to Colorado.

There are two venomous lizards found in North America, the Gila monster and the Mexican beaded lizard. Fortunately, neither of these two reside in Colorado. These very large lizards with thick bodies and short legs live in the desert regions.

Colorado is home to 19 different species of lizards. Neither has a venomous bite, but they can bite. Lizards have small teeth, and when biting, they hang on with their teeth, making removal somewhat difficult. Most bites do not break the skin and any damage to your person usually results from trying to remove the dangling lizard, rather than the bite itself.

Lizards will not usually bite you unless you try and pick them up. There is little chance that I would ever try to pick one up. If your dog gets a hold of one, you may encounter a bite while you try and remove it from the pup’s mouth but remove it you must. Lizards carry salmonella, and the dog’s mouth must be thoroughly rinsed out to prevent the dog from getting sick. Probably better wash your hands too.

One of the most common lizards in our area is

the Colorado whiptail, or *Aspidoscelis neotesselatus*, in case you were wondering. What makes them especially interesting is that they are a population of triploids, having three sets of chromosomes instead of the normal two.

These small critters are made up of females, who can reproduce parthenogenetically, meaning they are asexual. The egg cells develop without being fertilized, making the offspring identical to their mother. The mother can lay up to four eggs at a time. Talk about natural cloning.

Despite reproducing asexually and being an all-female species, these lizards still mate with other females of their own species. Interestingly, those who do not mate will not lay eggs.

The lizard I have seen the most of locally is the plateau striped whiptail, or *Cnemidophorus septemvittatus* for your scientific types. There is a number of subspecies running around our area as well.

The plateau striped whiptail is mostly gray in color, with up to a dozen yellow and white stripes running down the length of their body. They have very thin bodies and very long tails, but can reach a foot in length, although I have never seen one larger than about half of that. They are dismal and insectivores, which are very fast and dart away quickly if you get to close.

Like most lizards, the whiptail feeds mostly on insects. They will eat flying insects, beetles, scorpions, and even another lizard on occasion. These critters are daytime feeders and usually spend the entire day foraging and sometimes

digging for a meal. They do hibernate during the winter months, staying in their underground burrow.

These lizards are very fast and can reach a speed of 15 mph for a short distance. Sometimes they run on their hind legs. These lizards have an average lifespan of three years.

The plateau striped whiptail is the official state reptile for the state of New Mexico. I never knew there were official reptiles for states, but for Colorado, the Western painted turtle has the distinction, being adopted in 2008.

There are no major threats facing this species at this time. They are officially classified as a species of least concern, meaning their population numbers are very stable, a rare thing in this time of climate change.

When I grew up on the other side of our state, I don’t recall seeing any lizards at all. If you take short trip into the piñon and juniper territory, they are all over the place, and can be very interesting to watch. At least they don’t hiss at me in the early morning hours.

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Hiking? Remember Ridgway State Park

SPECIAL TO THE MONTROSE DAILY PRESS

Ridgway State Park offers year-round hiking/walking trails for locals and visitors to enjoy. Here’s a refresher, courtesy of Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

Seven miles of trails connect the north and south ends of the park. About three miles of universally-accessible concrete trails and 11 miles of natural surface trails enable visitors to enjoy the scenery yet remain within easy distance of park facilities.

All three park areas (Pa-Co-Chu-Puk, Dallas Creek, and Dutch Charlie) provide some universally-accessible trails close to picnic areas and restrooms. Three of the park’s trails, including the Forest Discovery Nature Trail , are self-guided educational nature trails for visitors to learn more about the vegetation, wildlife and geology of this area.

During the winter months, come snowshoe or cross-country ski on any of the trails. Other times of year, bikers can use all trails except the Dallas Nature Creek Trail. Equestrian use is prohibited on gravel trails but allowed on road shoulders and through meadows. Pets on a 6-foot leash are allowed on all park trails, but all pet waste must be carried out and disposed of properly.

Park trails range from moderate walks to challenging hikes, so keep in mind that hiking at 7,000 feet can be a challenge. Wear sturdy hiking boots, carry adequate drinking water and rest immediately if you feel tired. Please check maps carefully and don’t hesitate to contact the park staff with questions.

Popular trails include:

- Mear’s Bay Trail

This is a roughly level one-mile concrete trail that winds along the shoreline of Mear’s Bay in the Dutch Charlie area. Waterfowl such as Western grebe, Canada geese and great blue heron can be seen here during the more quiet hours of the day. Enjoy beautiful views

of the San Juan Mountains reflected in the bay.

- Marmot Run Trail

Located in the Dallas Creek Day Use area, this 1.8-mile universally-accessible trail runs along the east shore of the Uncompahgre River and the Ridgway Reservoir. The trail was named for the large number of marmots that live at its southern end, and connects the south end of Ridgway State Park to the town of Ridgway four miles away. It is a perfect trail to observe waterfowl and wildlife along the riverbanks and lakeshore and there are picnic sites and restrooms conveniently located along the way.

- Enchanted Mesa Trail

This is the longest and most physically challenging trail in the park, but it is arguably the most beautiful. It runs along the western side of Enchanted Mesa, a beautiful flat top pasture that harbors Mule deer and elk. This 2.5-mile trail is the only non-motorized link between the Pa-Co-Chu-Puk area on the north side of the park and the Dutch Charlie area.

The trail offers spectacular views of the Ridgway Reservoir as well as of the Sneffels and Cimarron ranges of the San Juan Mountains. Yuccas and cactus bloom along the trail in the spring. Trailheads exist on both the Pa-Co-Chu-Puk and Dutch Charlie (via Mear’s Bay Trail) sides of the trail as alternate access points to reduce the overall length of the trail.

- Cookie Tree Trail

This steep, one-mile long trail was named for the Cookie Tree Ranch which was flooded by the creation of Ridgway Reservoir in 1989. The trail links the Dutch Charlie area of the park to the Dallas Creek Day Use area. Cookie Tree offers great views of the San Juan Mountains and of the Ridgway Reservoir. Given its dry southern exposure, this trail is also a good place to see prickly pear and claret cup cacti bloom in May and June. The trail connects to Marmot Run Trail in Dallas Creek and to Wapiti and Pinyon Park Trails in Dutch Charlie.



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