



Foothills

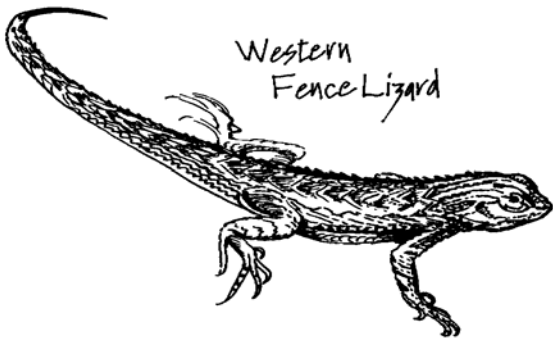
Nature Notes

CITY OF PALO ALTO • COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT • OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND GOLF DIVISION

Lizards of the Foothills

Take a close look at the next lizard you see and imagine this same little creature 50 feet long. A fearsome thought? Yet size is really the most conspicuous difference between the lizards of today and the prehistoric monsters that roamed the primeval landscape 150 million years ago. Many times, in fact, moviemakers have used small lizards to represent ancient dinosaurs by photographing them against midget scale backgrounds and employing other trick photographic techniques.

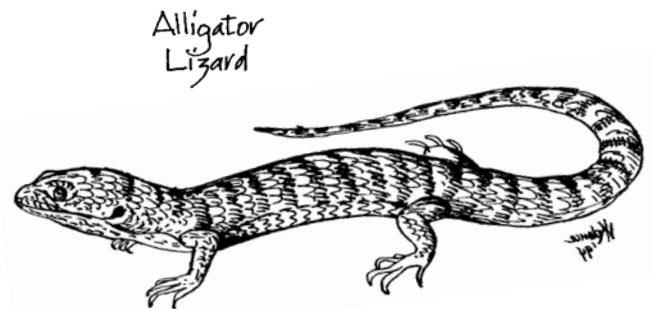
Like the dinosaurs, contemporary lizards are reptiles. Modern reptiles might be defined as cold-blooded vertebrates with lungs and scales or horny plates. They are without any internal heat regulatory mechanism and are dependent upon the outside environment for temperature control. To some extent they can regulate their body temperature by shifting their positions between sun and shade. Some lizards lay eggs with leathery shells; others are live-bearers. Five species are known to inhabit the foothills. Late summer is an excellent time to look for them as they are actively feeding upon the abundant insect supply at this time of year.



Western Fence Lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis*) The common Swift or Fence Lizard is the most abundant lizard locally, often seen scurrying across rock piles, fences, and roadsides on hot summer afternoons. Occasionally, you will see one perched atop a rock a busily engaged in a series of “push-ups.” The push-ups are employed by males courting females and serve as a warning to other males. Fence Lizards are very territorial and will drive off intruders. Bluish markings on the belly characterize this lizard and account for the often used name of “Blue-belly.” They may reach a total length of about six inches and possess sharp scales that are

noticeably keeled.

Alligator Lizard (*Gerrhonotus sp.*) An alligator-like appearance gives name to this heavy-set lizard with short legs and smooth scales. Another easily recognized characteristic is the fold of skin low on each side of the body between the legs. These lizards move snake-like through the litter and underbrush, hunting insects and other ground dwelling invertebrates. Seldom do they venture into the open like their swift cousins. They can be quite pugnacious when picked up, biting and smearing its would-be captor with foul-smelling excrement. When mating, the male grasps the female by the back of the neck with its jaws, which looks like foes engaged in vicious combat.





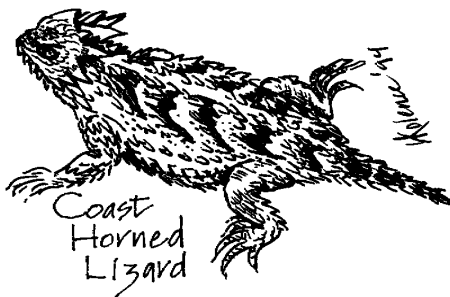
Western Skink (*Eumeces skiltonianus*) Your only acquaintance with this very shy creature may be a rustling of leaves as the slender lizard stealthily hunts spiders, insects, and sowbugs amidst the woodland ground litter. Juveniles possess a brilliant blue tail which distinguishes this lizard from all others locally. When seized, the tail is immediately shed, leaving the attacker with a wiggling tail while the lizard hastily bids

a safe retreat, and will later grow a new tail. Adults may reach a total length of six or seven inches and have a grayish tail. The scales of the skink are very smooth, imparting a lustrous, almost glass-like appearance to this very handsome reptile.

Western Whiptail (*Cnemidophorus tigris*) The Western Whiptail has only been observed a few times in the area. They are generally seen flashing across the ground with amazing speed, lifting the tail in air as they run. They are exceedingly active when warmed by the sun, and dart about in rapid jerks gobbling up insects. They reach a length often inches or more, with the tail accounting for two-thirds or more of the total length. Bead-like rather than imbricated scales on the upper part of the body differentiate this lizard from all others locally.



Coast Horned Lizard (*Phrynosoma coronatum*) The pudgy “Horned Toad” is really a true lizard and not an amphibian as are true toads. They appear to be quite rare in these foothills. One beautiful specimen found was about 4-1/2 inches long, and was a rich, red earth shade matching the ground color beneath the chaparral where it lived. Camouflage is needed for protection. Horned Lizards feed on a variety of insects and seem to be especially fond of ants. Sometimes, if sufficiently disturbed, they will actually squirt blood out of the corners of the eyes. This may have some defensive value in confusing an attacker. A ring of prominent horns forms a crown at the back of the head and distinguishes this particularly interesting lizard.



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