

Lyre Snake

BY TERRY B. JOHNSON • ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZDINAK

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Trimorphodon biscutatus*. The genus is Greek for three shapes (kinds) of teeth, and the specific epithet (also Greek) means two kinds of plates, or perhaps scales.

DESCRIPTION: Most adults are 2-3 ft. long; maximum length 4 ft. Distinctive brown and gray dorsal blotches run the length of the slender body. Each blotch is a jagged-edged hexagon, split by a gray-tan cross bar. The head is spade shaped, with a lyre- or chevron-shaped mark on it. The bulging eyes are catlike, with vertical elliptical pupils.

DISTRIBUTION: Southern California, Nevada, and Utah, through Arizona and New Mexico into western Texas, then south to Costa Rica. In Arizona, the western Arizona Strip south to the border with Sonora, Mexico.

HABITAT: A rock-dwelling species, most commonly associated with boulder fields, cliffs, and outcrops of granite, limestone, and other kinds of rocks. Frequents desertscrub, semi-desert grassland, and evergreen woodland habitats, ranging from arid foothills and lower mountains up into pine forests above 7,000 feet. Occasionally occurs in flatland habitats, including creosote flats, where rocks are conspicuously absent.

BIOLOGY: This rear-fanged species uses venom to subdue its prey. An enlarged, grooved “fang” toward the back of each upper jaw delivers the venom, which is not deadly or even dangerous to humans. A single personal experience, induced by careless handling (which is true of most snake bites), indicates a healthy dose from an adult causes localized redness, a bit of swelling, considerable itchiness, and a touch of numbness. The symptoms disappear within a day or two.

Lizards and small rodents (e.g., mice) that dwell in rocky habitats are primary prey. Other animals that are taken include bats, birds, and snakes. The prey is grasped firmly and maneuvered until it becomes impaled on the grooved fangs that deliver venom less efficiently, but no less effectively, than the “hypodermic needle” fangs of a rattlesnake.

Because lyre snakes are primarily nocturnal creatures, they are not seen as frequently as many other species of snakes. Most people see them crossing roads, getting “caught” in the headlights. Individuals found during daylight in shrubs, small trees, or in rafters, etc., of outbuildings such as ramadas and sheds are typically resting, not foraging.

A strong and agile climber, the lyre snake is often found 10 or more feet above ground, and does not hesitate to climb to avoid a human in “hot pursuit.” Once aloft in vegetation, this species is easily lost in branches or vines as its subdued color pattern blends in very well.

Like several other snakes, this species tends to vibrate its tail rapidly when cornered. In leaf litter, the sound is reminiscent of a rattlesnake’s buzz, especially if you have never heard the real thing. No doubt many a lyre snake has lost its life to a case of mistaken identity.

Lyre snakes are oviparous (egg-layers), depositing seven to 20 1-inch-long eggs in spring-summer. The 8- to 9-inch-long hatchlings emerge in September-October and are independent from the start.

STATUS: The lyre snake is not seen too often, but it is not rare. It is not federally listed as an endangered, threatened, or candidate species, and it is not among the species the Arizona Game and Fish Department considers *Wildlife of Special Concern in Arizona*.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: None; other than outreach efforts to inform and educate the public about the lyre snake’s ecological importance, to minimize ignorance-induced mortalities, and to reduce the unfounded “fear and loathing” reaction to snakes that too many people learn so early and easily in childhood. ♣

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Author Terry B. Johnson says that of all the snakes he has encountered in the wild in Arizona, none has been more beautiful than a 4-foot lyre snake he saw emerging one night from a granite-walled wash, the snake obviously having just shed its skin.

