

Desert Night Lizard

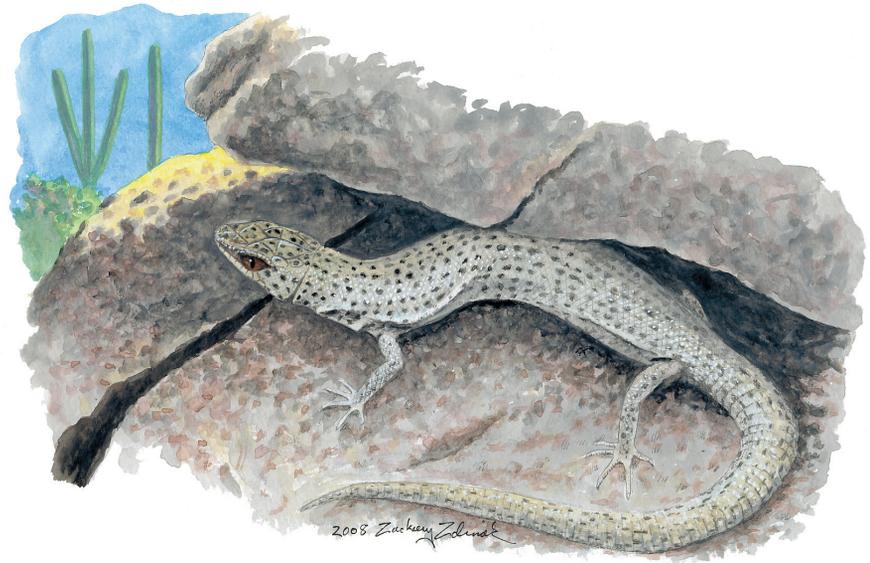
SCIENTIFIC NAME: The desert night lizard (*Xantusia vigilis*) is one of three species of night lizards recognized in Arizona. The genus *Xantusia* is named after infamous collector John Xantus, who collected the type specimen at Fort Tejon in Southern California in the late 1850s. *Vigilis* means “watchful” or “alert.”

DESCRIPTION: This is a small lizard of up to 2.25 inches long, not counting the tail, which is about as long as the body. The desert night lizard has vertically elliptical pupils and no eyelids. The top of the head is covered with large, plate-like scales. Small, granular scales on the body give this lizard a velvety appearance. The tail is heavy and ringed in rectangular scales. The white or cream-colored belly also is covered with rectangular, non-overlapping scales.

This lizard is usually gray, brown or tan in color, sometimes with a greenish cast. Its body typically is covered with small dark spots that may form longitudinal stripes. A light stripe extends back from the eye to the neck and shoulder. Its limbs and toes are short. All four legs are about the same length. A fold of loose skin runs down each side between the front and rear limbs.

DISTRIBUTION: The desert night lizard ranges from western Arizona, southern California, southern Nevada and Utah south to the Mexican states of Baja California and Sonora. This lizard’s distribution is highly fragmented in southwestern Arizona, where it occurs in mountain ranges located great distances apart.

HABITAT: In Arizona, this lizard is associated with desertscrub and chaparral



in western Arizona, but its distribution extends into pinyon pine and juniper habitat in places. This lizard typically shelters beneath the debris of any dead and fallen vegetation that provides sufficiently dense cover. Typical retreats include dead or fallen yuccas, agaves, saguaros or nolina, and occasionally wood rat nests, trash or the bark of fallen trees. This lizard also shelters in rock crevices and boulders.

BIOLOGY: Unlike most Arizona reptiles, night lizards give live birth, producing one to two young in late summer and fall. The young exit upside down and backward through the mother’s “cloaca” (the single opening through

which reptiles mate, void waste and lay eggs or give birth).

The mother assists the birth by tearing the membranous birth sac with her teeth and may prompt the young to wiggle free with a nip to an exposed tail or leg. After giving birth, the mother also consumes the birth sac, a behavior typical in mam-

mals but virtually unheard-of in reptiles.

This lizard preys on termites, beetles and other small invertebrates. An aggressive predator, it can tackle prey nearly one-third its size.

Despite its name, the desert night lizard is active during the day in sheltered retreats. Studies have documented some species of night lizards living up to 20 years, a long life for such a small reptile.

STATUS: A common if seldom-seen member of Arizona’s reptile fauna, the desert night lizard may be found in most suitable habitats in western Arizona. Populations are presumed to be stable.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Potential threats include land uses that remove dead vegetation or destroy boulder habitats. Night lizard distribution is poorly understood in Arizona, so this lizard should be watched for in suitable habitat. The genetic relationships of Arizona’s night lizards have become much clearer in recent years, helping people to better ensure the survival of desert and other night lizard species. ◀

■ The author is a naturalist who manages information and education activities for the Mesa office of the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

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