



# Common Chuckwalla

**SQUAMATA**  
**Family: Iguanidae**  
**Genus: *Sauromalus***  
**Species: *ater***



**Range:** Mojave and Sonoran deserts of southeastern California, southern Nevada and Utah, western Arizona and south to Sonora, Mexico and the mainland and islands of Baja.  
**Habitat:** prefer lava flows and rocky areas with drought tolerant shrubs and desert like conditions  
**Niche:** diurnal, terrestrial, primarily herbivorous  
**Wild diet:** leaves, fruit, buds and flowers, occasionally insects  
**Zoo diet:**  
**Life Span:** wild 15 years, captivity 25 years  
**Sexual dimorphism:** males are larger than females with coloring differences  
**Location in SF Zoo:** Herps room

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## APPEARANCE & PHYSICAL ADAPTATIONS:

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The common chuckwalla is the second largest lizard native to the United States (after the Gila Monster). They are a stocky wide-bodied lizard with a flattened midsection and prominent belly. Their tails are thick, tapering to a blunt tip and will regenerate if detached. These lizards have loose folds of skin around the neck, shoulders and sides of the body, which is covered in small, coarsely granular scales. Scales on the tail are the largest. Chuckwallas have short legs with hind limbs being longer than the forelimbs.

<b>Weight:</b> 9.9 – 13 oz <b>Length:</b> 15 - 20 in. (about ½ is tail) <b>Width:</b>
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There is a lot of color variation in both sexes and the color can change with temperature, surroundings and mood as well as with age; males are usually darker. Males have enlarged femoral pores located on the inner sides of their thighs; these pores produce secretions believed to play a role in marking territory. Females and the immature have bodies with scattered spots or contrasting bands of light and dark in shades of gray or yellow.

Like many lizards, chuckwallas are capable of autotomy; they can break off and re-grow a tail, if necessary, to evade predation. Chuckwallas' teeth grow in grooves inside their mouth. If they lose one, they will re grow one to replace it.

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## STATUS & CONSERVATION

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Common chuckwalla are not listed on the IUCN Red list or CITES Appendix. Their populations are protected by national parks and naturally protected due to their remote habitat (rugged terrain and harsh climate). Trends towards developing desert areas of the United States and parts of Mexico are affecting common chuckwalla habitat; however the population status as a whole has been reported as large, and stable. Populations throughout most of their range are considered stable. Their habitat makes hunting for the pet trade difficult.

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## COMMUNICATION AND OTHER BEHAVIOR

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When disturbed, the loose folds of skin on chuckwallas enable them to climb into a small crevice on a rock face, gulp air to fill their lungs to full capacity and distend their bodies to nearly twice normal girth. In addition they use their strong claws and rough skin when wedging themselves into the crevice to make extraction by a predator (coyote, re-tailed hawks, rattlesnakes) difficult.

These solitary, diurnal lizards emerge in the morning and, before seeking food, bask in the sun until their optimum body temperature of 100 - 105 degrees F. is reached. The chuckwallas' habit of lying almost totally flat provides two advantages. First, this posture enables them to absorb more heat. Second, the low-profile likely affords them greater camouflage from predators, especially air born predators, who will have trouble detecting either a chuckwalla or its shadow.

Chuckwallas are active from mid-March to mid-August, but may aestivate in the summer months when food is scarce. From November through March they may go through brumation.

Male chuckwallas are territorial and will defend their territory against other males; they typically stage a bluff battle by arching their back, lowering their head, and gaping their mouth, to intimidate the rival. He may also lash his tail and/or bite, if needed, to defend his territory.

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## COURTSHIP AND YOUNG

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Common chuckwalla males use head-bobbing, licking, circling, nudging, jaw-rubbing, and other methods to persuade females to mate. They generally mate with several females that are found within their territory. Breeding occurs in April to May. Females may only lay eggs every two to three years, depending on food availability and rainfall. Eggs are laid in rocky crevices by August and the young generally hatch out in late September, after which they are independent. Males do not provide parental care.

Incubation: 35 days	Sexual Maturity: 2 – 3 years
# of young: 5 – 16 (ave 8)	Weight at birth:
	Length at birth:

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## MISCELLANEOUS

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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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created: 4/2016