



LIZARD HABITAT

1. Learn
2. Provide a food source
3. Create shelter/nesting sites
4. Provide basking areas
5. Eliminate pesticide use
6. Certify

1. LEARN

Lizards make a great addition to your habitat. Their striking colors and quirky antics are reason enough to invite them in. Welcoming reptiles into your backyard is also an excellent way to support local biodiversity, as they provide a valuable food source for birds like the Greater Roadrunner and American Kestrel. Additionally, lizards are an important form of pest control, feeding on larvae, termites, grasshoppers, beetles, and spiders.

COMMON BACKYARD LIZARDS

The ornate tree lizard is commonly found in cottonwood or mesquite trees and along riparian areas, making it a frequent visitor to backyards. Its markings blend well with the bark, helping it avoid predators. FUN FACT: Recent research has found that female tree lizards do not necessarily choose a male based on physical traits. Instead, they select a territory and then choose a male whose range overlaps with theirs.



ornate tree lizard, Honu Green

Whiptails are another lizard you are likely to see in your backyard. Did you know that approximately six species of whiptails in Arizona have evolved to be asexual? For example, in the absence of males, Sonoran spotted whiptail mothers continue to reproduce by laying eggs that are complete clones of herself!



Sonoran spotted whiptail, Richard Fray

2. PROVIDE A FOOD SOURCE WITH NATIVE PLANTS

“Food is critical, and ants are the first order”

-Phil Rossen

Most species of ants are important food sources for the majority of lizards. For instance, at least two to three colonies of large ants such as harvester and leafcutter ants within an acre or hectare are required for a regal horned lizard.



regal horned lizard, Jennie MacFarland

PROVIDE FOOD FOR ANTS

An abundance of seed is needed by many ant species as food, especially harvester ants. Planting grama grasses such as needle grama (*Bouteloua aristidoides*) and six-weeks grama (*Bouteloua barbata*) are the best way to provide forage for ants within the Tucson region.

PLANT NATIVE TREES, SHRUBS, AND FLOWERING PLANTS

Diverse, native vegetation creates habitat that attracts native insects to your yard while providing flowering plant material for our plant-eating lizards (chuckwalla and desert iguana). Overall, insect abundance and diversity is critical for most lizards.



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WHAT TO PLANT TO ATTRACT LIZARDS:

TREES

Desert willow (*Chilopsis linearis*)
Netleaf hackberry (*Celtis reticulata*)
Whitethorn acacia (*Acacia constricta*)
Velvet mesquite (*Prosopis velutina*)
Ironwood (*Olneya tesota*)

SHRUBS

Creosote (*Larrea tridentata*)
Pink fairy duster (*Calliandra eriophylla*)
Brittlebush (*Encelia farinosa*)
Desert hackberry (*Celtis pallida*)
Trailing indigo bush (*Dalea greggii*)
Wolfberry (*Lycium spp*)

FLOWERING

Plumbago (*Plumbago scandens*)
Butterfly mist (*Eupatorium spp*)
Penstemon (*Penstemon spp*)
Goodding's verbena (*Glandularia gooddingii*)
Globe mallow (*Sphaeralcea ambigua*)
Chuparosa (*Justicia californica*)

CACTI

Saguaro (*Carnegiea gigantea*)
Prickly pear (*Opuntia spp*)
Cholla (*Cylindropuntia spp*)



desert spiny lizard, Erica Freese

3. PROVIDE SHELTER/NESTING SITES

Many lizards dig holes to lay their eggs, while others will bury them in leaf litter or hide them in the nooks and crannies of trees or caves. Providing safe places for adults to nest and juveniles to hatch is incredibly important since in most cases, parental care is minimal once the female has laid her eggs.

PLANT DIVERSE VEGETATION LAYERS

- Ground cover and shrubs provide ground-dwelling lizards with shade and cover from predators, while increasing food opportunities
- Canopy trees, like velvet mesquite, provide shelter and basking spots for tree-dwelling lizards like the ornate tree lizard

BUILD A ROCK PILE

- Geckos
 - For our native Western banded gecko, lay flat lying objects, such as boards inconspicuously under tree canopies to provide daytime shelter for these nocturnal lizards
 - Take care when moving potted plants - the Western banded gecko likes to hide out in moist, cool spots during the day.
- Arboreal lizards
 - Place rocks/rock piles at the base of trees to provide protection from cats and roadrunners as well as to provide thermal variations which can increase activity and basking.
 - For areas with dogs, use large, heavy boulders or other solid cover to prevent being dug up.
 - Stacking large rocks on top of each other provides hiding holes for lizards to escape predators like cats, dogs, and birds. They also provide a basking location that is close to shelter.
- Lizards that dig for shelter
 - Provide a dirt pile for lizards to rest and nest in. Dirt piles are especially helpful in areas where the soil is very hard or thin.
 - Not suitable for areas with dogs as they may dig up the dirt pile.



lizard rock pile, Kim Matsushino





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4. PROVIDE BASKING AREAS

Lizards are ectothermic, meaning they regulate their body temperature through external sources rather than generating their own heat. Therefore, they aren't "cold-blooded" in the sense that their blood is cold by default; instead, their body temperature varies with the environment. Temperature is the most crucial environmental factor for lizards.

Most lizard species have a preferred body temperature range of 82–100°F, which they maintain through thermoregulation. Diurnal lizards bask in the early morning, positioning their bodies to maximize sun exposure until they reach this preferred temperature range.

Achieving the preferred temperature is vital for lizards, as it significantly affects their ability to perform various behaviors and maintain optimal metabolic function. Their performance in executing these behaviors is only optimal when they have reached their preferred body temperature.

BASKING SITES

- NATIVE TREES
Branches that spread out and downward are ideal spaces for lizards to bask in
- DEAD SNAGS
Dead snags that are exposed to the sun provide safe places for lizards to emerge and warm themselves or to sustain their activity in the cooler months.
- ROCKS AND ROCK PILES UNDER TREE CANOPY
Situate large rocks and rocks piled together under the shelter of a tree's canopy to create thermal diversity and shelter from predators.

5. ELIMINATE PESTICIDE USE

Lizards primarily feed on insects, so poisoning their food source can indirectly harm lizards as well. To maintain a healthy lizard population, it is essential to eliminate pesticide use. A study on the Western fence lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis*) showed that high levels of exposure to carbaryl, an insecticide, resulted in reduced arboreal sprint speed and endurance. These sublethal effects can impact fitness by diminishing the lizards' ability to escape predators.

6. CERTIFY YOUR LIZARD-APPROVED HABITAT

Once you have completed your habitat, email urbanhabitats@tucsonbirds.org to receive your certification sticker.

