

National Park Service



LAKE MEAD NATIONAL RECREATION AREA



OUR LIVING DESERT



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“Our Living Desert” was written for the Las Vegas Review-Journal’s Newspaper as a publication for students in Southern Nevada. Although written for the independent reader, the extensive use of illustrations in this publication is intended to enhance awareness and interest for even the youngest reader.

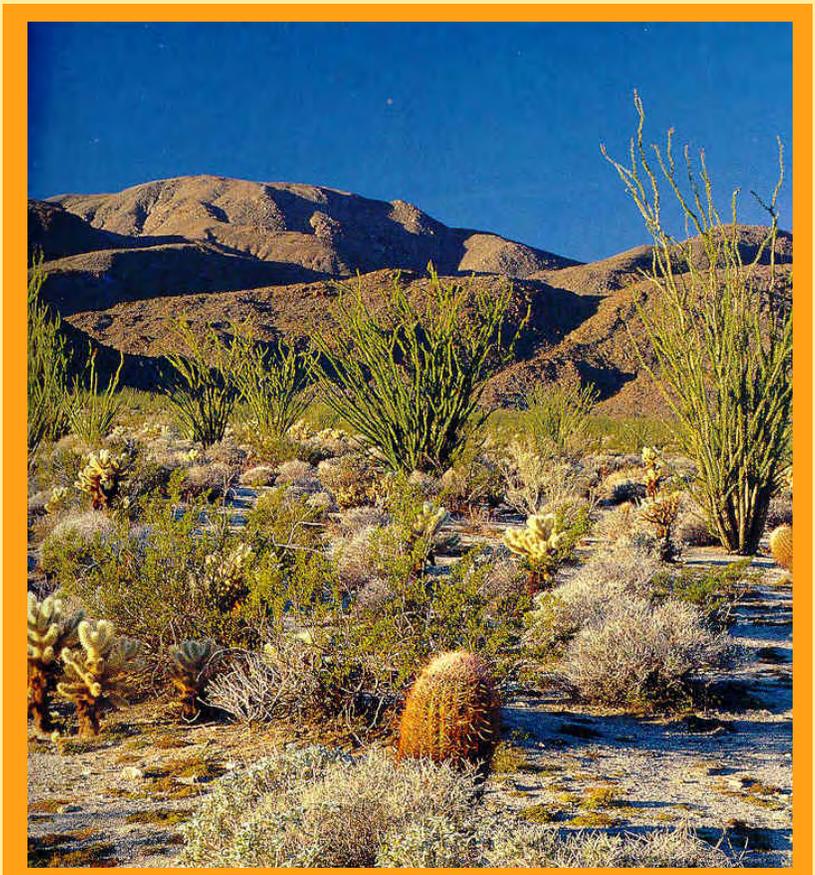
From the formation of the land to the conservation of its resources, this was written to provide an overview of the natural history and life that can be found in the desert. From cacti to mammals, every reader should find an area of interest and new knowledge to share.

“Our Living Desert” contributors were selected experts from the Bureau of Land Management, Nevada Department of Wildlife, Nevada Division of Forestry and Nevada Cooperative Extension.

This version of “Our Living Desert” has been rewritten and updated with photographs compiled from the National Park Service Database at Lake Mead National Recreation Area.

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WHAT IS A DESERT?

At first glance, the desert seems to be dry and barren. But look closely and you will see nature's wonders at their best. There are many different kinds of plants, animals, insects, fish and reptiles that have adapted to living in the desert.

Did you know that most of Nevada is desert? The northern two-thirds of our state is the Great Basin Desert. Southern Nevada, where we live, is part of the Mojave Desert. These deserts are between the Coast Ranges; Sierra Nevada and Cascade Mountains are to the west and the Rocky Mountains are to the east. This interior region is called the Basin and Range province. The entire area is made up of large basins dotted with smaller mountain ranges.

Las Vegas is surrounded by these small mountain ranges. The range to the west, the Spring Mountain Range, contributes to the dryness of Las Vegas. The desert is a fragile area. The animals and plants depend on each other and their surroundings for survival. Many animals need plants for food, homes, shelter and shade. Many plants need insects, birds and other animals to pollinate their flowers, spread their seeds or keep their neighbors from growing too big. Kangaroo rats and other animals that eat seeds depend on the insects that pollinate flowers so they can make seeds. Even the mammals, reptiles and birds that eat insects and other small animals depend on the plants that the smaller creatures eat.

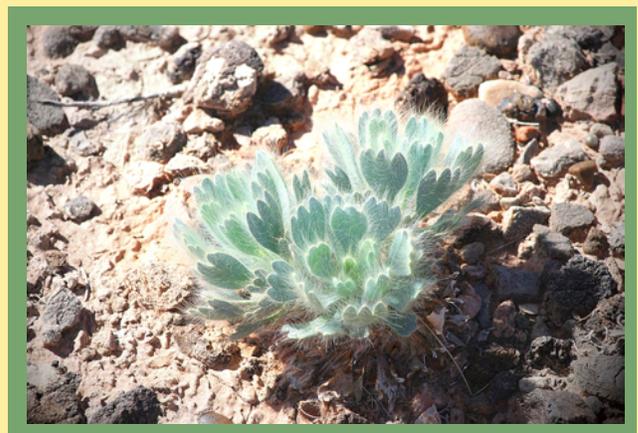


The ground is important also. Many desert plants can only grow if the soil is just the right kind and the right depth. Rocks, cliffs and dry washes give shade and protection for plants and animals. Some plants can grow only in the shade of a larger plant. Some plants need open spaces away from other plants that compete for water and sunlight. Even bacteria and fungi are

important. These decompose dead plants and animals and return nutrients to the soil, which in turn helps other things grow.

Nearly every living thing in the desert depends on something else to survive. Even a small change in the desert ecosystem can harm many plants and animals. Nature sometimes

changes the environment quickly with great storms, earthquakes or landslides. But usually, nature makes very small changes over a long time, and plants and animals are able to adapt or change to survive.



VISITING A DESERT



FIRST THINGS FIRST

You can help preserve the desert.

Please read the tips and safety instructions below.

Wear sturdy shoes and long pants to protect yourself from cactus spines.

Always carry plenty of water (a gallon per person)

Wear a hat for protection

Hike with a buddy

Let someone know where you are going

Let them know when you plan to be back

Walking in the desert is fun. However, it is wise to remember a few things to safely have fun in the desert. To avoid bites and stings, do not turn over rocks or put your hands in an animal burrow. Snakes, scorpions and other poisonous insects find protection and keep cool under rocks.



REMEMBER

1. Be careful and safe: explore the desert with a family member or friend.
2. Remember not to disturb any animals or plants.
3. Always take your litter home with you.

WHY IS THE DESERT DRY?



ISLAND MOUNTAINS

Although we live in a desert, we can look around us and see many mountains. The mountains are like islands in the desert. Animals and plants that live on these 'islands' are very different than the animals and plants found below the desert. Because the mountains reach high into the sky they are able to "catch" clouds as they pass. Then it forces them higher, where they cool, causing them to rain or snow. The climate is cooler and wetter so the animals and plants have different adaptations than on the dry desert below. The animals on the mountains cannot survive in the desert, so they stay in their 'island' where they have adapted to live. Some plants and animals are only found in a specific mountain range because they are not able to migrate across the desert.



TRILOBITES AND RED ROCKS



Trilobites: residents of the ancient desert

Fossils are the petrified remains of animals or plants that died millions of years ago. A type of fossil found in Southern Nevada is the Trilobite found at Frenchman Mountain. Trilobites swam in the ancient ocean that once covered Southern Nevada. These fossils are about the size of a quarter. Trilobites are an example of early invertebrates.

Why are the Rocks at RED ROCK red?

The rocks at Lake Mead's Redstone Picnic Area, Redstone Canyon, and the Valley of Fire are red because they are rusted or oxidized. Have you ever seen a nail rust after it has been left in water? That is called oxidizing. The iron in the nail combines with oxygen and water to form rust. There are many iron particles trapped in the sandstone. When exposed to the atmosphere (air and weather conditions) the iron turns red.



DELICATE BALANCE

When you visit the desert it is important to remember that everything contributes to the balance of nature. You should never take home any animals or plants. Do not disturb or damage them in any way.

Like nature, people can change the desert. They can damage plants by walking on them, digging them up, breaking branches or picking flowers. Flowers make seeds which grow new plants or provide food for animals. Driving in the desert or digging up rocks and plants can disturb soil. The desert soil is very fragile. It is made up of a crust that holds seeds in the soil until there is enough rain to sprout. If the soil is disturbed, wind or rain can carry the soil and the seeds away.

Animals can be hurt or killed and their homes destroyed if they are stepped on or driven over by a vehicle. Some can be injured just by picking them up in the wrong way.

DELICATE BALANCE

Litter can hurt the desert. Broken glass and metal can cut an animal's feet or skin. Small mice can crawl into a bottle to drink the leftover liquid and then they cannot get out again. Plastic soda-rings and holders can get stuck on an animal's neck and choke it. Aluminum cans may get caught on an animal's foot, making it hard for the animal to walk or catch food. Many animals will also eat bits of paper or plastic thinking it is food, and they may get sick or die. Litter is ugly, but it can also be dangerous.



WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE?



Many people who live in Las Vegas do not know we live in a desert. We see homes, businesses and schools with green grass, shady trees, beautiful water fountains, even lakes. But where does all the water come from to keep the grass and trees growing, to fill the lakes, to let us drink and cook and wash?

Much of the water we use comes from Lake Mead, which is fed by the Colorado River. However, this supply is limited. It is controlled by the weather and by all of the cities along the river's path that also take water from it. Some of the water we use comes from underground wells. We pump the water out of natural reservoirs (underground lakes or rivers) fed by watersheds. Watershed occurs when forested mountains and hills allow the rain and snow to seep into the ground rather than run off into the valley.

WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE

Unfortunately, we are already taking water out of these underground reservoirs faster than watersheds can replace it.

On the average, Las Vegas gets about four to six inches of yearly rainfall. The normal rainy season lasts from November to March. However, the rain does not always fall at the same time each year. Some years there may be more or less rainfall than the average amount. Summer thunderstorms usually last for a short time and are small in size. Most of the water from these storms runs off before it can soak in the soil. This is called a flash flood.

Approximately 70% of the water used in the Las Vegas area goes to outdoor landscapes, such as lawns, golf courses, trees and shrubs. Have you ever seen sprinklers watering the sidewalk or water running down the gutter on a clear day? We can save this water by being more careful and not being wasteful.



A YEAR'S SUPPLY OF WATER

Deserts have little water because it seldom rains. Sometimes only four to six inches of rain fall onto a given space of land in a year. To find out how much water that is, try this simple experiment. Have someone hold a ruler in an empty soup can, then fill the can with water to the four-inch mark. You will see how much rain falls on the same area of desert each year.

REPTILES

Western Fence Lizard

Everyone who lives in Southern Nevada has probably seen the western fence lizard. It is one of the most common lizards found in this area. You might see this lizard in backyards, on school playgrounds or in vacant lots. The brown fence lizard can be easily identified by the bright blue patches on its stomach. This is why it is often called "blue belly."



Roadrunners, coyotes and falcons like to eat the fence lizard. It has an interesting way to protect itself. If grabbed, the fence lizard's tail comes off to distract its enemy, and this gives the lizard time to escape. It will soon grow a new tail.

Horned Lizard

Some people call this desert dweller a horned toad. It is actually named a horned lizard. There are two types of horned lizards that are found in Southern Nevada. The most common is the desert horned lizard. The other is the short horned lizard. Horned lizards are black and tan. They can be easily identified by the horns on the back of their heads. Their bodies are covered with small spines. If you see an ant hill, chances are that a horned lizard is in



the area. Ants are the horned lizard's favorite food. These reptiles have an unusual way of defending themselves against predators. Horned lizards squirt blood from their eyes when they are scared or feel threatened. This can distract the predator long enough for the horned lizard to escape.

Sidewinder



The Mojave Desert sidewinder is common in the Las Vegas area, but is rarely seen. Sidewinders are usually gray or tan. Like other rattlesnakes, sidewinders are venomous. They also have distinctive eye flaps that give the appearance of horns on their heads. The sidewinder is nocturnal. It eats kangaroo rats and other rodents.

REPTILES

Tortoise



Desert tortoises are easily recognized by their hard shells and thick, elephant-like legs. Their front legs are larger than their rear legs in order to dig burrows. This is an important activity in the life of a tortoise because burrows protect them on hot summer days. They also hibernate in these burrows during the winter.

The desert tortoise is a herbivore, meaning it eats only plants, such as grasses, blossoms, and cactus. It can be found grazing in the mornings and late afternoons to avoid the heat of the summer sun. Desert tortoises can live to be 100 years old. Female tortoises normally lay four to six eggs during the month of June. The eggs are deposited in a shallow hole and covered with dirt. The eggs take several months to hatch.

BIRDS

Birds of a Feather

Southern Nevada is home to many different and interesting birds, such as the roadrunner and golden eagle. Migratory birds come through Southern Nevada often on their way to far-away places. Here are some birds you might see in the Las Vegas area.

Golden Eagle

This graceful bird can be seen soaring at great heights above Southern Nevada. These are very large birds. Adults can measure up to three feet long, with a wingspan of up to seven feet across. They are brown with a white tail band and feathered legs. Eagles usually build their nests on suitable cliff, ledges or less frequently, in trees.

Prey includes rabbits, mice, reptiles and injured water birds.



BIRDS

Prairie Falcon

The prairie falcon is found throughout Nevada. This powerful bird can be seen flying close to the ground searching for prey such as rabbits and kangaroo rats. Prairie falcons are light brown with black markings under their wings. Their call is a series of short, high squeals.



Burrowing Owl

The burrowing owl is brown with long legs and yellow eyes. It gets its name because it makes its home in burrows that were taken over from ground squirrels and other burrowing mammals. Unlike its nocturnal relatives, this owl is as likely to be seen during the day as it is at night. When threatened, the burrowing owl will bob its head up and down. That is why some people call them “how-de-do birds”. Food for the owl consists mainly of lizards, grasshoppers, field mice and insects. It raises its young and keeps cool in its burrow during hot summer days.

Greater Roadrunner

Roadrunners are very common to Southern Nevada. Greater roadrunners are fast runners and seldom fly. They are ground dwellers that hunt lizards, snakes, birds and invertebrates. A roadrunner is often seen running with its neck outstretched and its tail held out flat. The greater roadrunner is a big bird with a long tail and bill. It also has a bush crest on its head.



BIRDS

Canyon Wren

Many people that get outdoors have heard this little bird, but often times you can't see it. The canyon wren has a distinctive song that can be heard as it echoes off the canyon walls. The adult wren is about 4 1/2 inches long. It has a white throat and breast, and a brown belly.



Gambel's Quail

This is one of four types of quail found in Nevada. The others are the California quail, mountain quail and scaled quail. Gambel's quail are easily identified by tufts of feathers, called topknots, on their heads. This bird is found in many parts of the southwestern U.S and northern Mexico. They can often be seen running in a covey (group) around our neighborhoods. Their food consists mostly of seeds and fruit.

Seeds, Bugs or Meat?

The shape of a bird's beak can help it survive. In the desert there are a variety of birds. Although similar, each bird's beak is different and determines what it can eat. The insect eater's beak helps it to catch and eat insects and small lizards. A seed eater's beak allows it to eat seeds, small insects and fruits. Birds of prey beaks have adapted for tearing and holding onto prey such as rodents and small mammals (like rabbits). Can you guess what type of beak each bird has in this section?



MAMMALS



Bats

Are bats birds or mammals?

Certainly you have seen bats as they fly about at night catching insects. Like most people, you have probably mistaken them for birds. Actually, bats are nocturnal flying mammals. They don't have feathers; bat wings are actually long fingers that are attached by thin layers of skin. Most bats found in Southern Nevada can't see very well. Yet, they don't have any trouble flying and scooping insects out of the air, even on the darkest nights. Bats are able to locate objects because they send out shrill sound waves. These sound waves bounce off objects such as insects, buildings and trees. Bats then receive the waves and are able to tell the location and size of an object.

Antelope Ground Squirrel

You can identify the antelope ground squirrel by the white lines running down each side of its grey body. Its cousins, the chipmunks, live at Mount Charleston. Antelope Ground Squirrels are well adapted to Southern Nevada's desert climate. They are able to let their body temperatures rise to high levels. Because of this, they are often the only creatures you will see in the desert during hot summer days.

These squirrels dig burrows underground where they go to cool off. They will also hibernate in the burrows if forced to by harsh weather.



Their favorite foods are green plants, seeds and insects. Predators include hawks, falcons and coyotes.

MAMMALS

Coyote - The Smart Survivor



Do you know how the coyote earned its reputation for being such a smart survivor? Coyotes are very opportunistic. That means the coyote will eat just about anything and do whatever is necessary to find a meal. Coyotes are carnivores or meat eaters, but they do sometimes eat plants. In Southern Nevada, the coyotes usually eat rodents, rabbits, lizards and birds. They will also eat small pets, animals that have been killed by automobiles and whatever food they can find in garbage dumps. Many predators are declining in numbers. Coyotes, however, are actually growing in number and in the places where they are found. Adult coyotes weigh between 20 and 50 pounds. They are fast runners and can easily outrun any human. Coyotes are gray or rusty gray with white throats and bellies. When running, the coyote holds its tail between its hind legs.

Blacktail Jackrabbit

Blacktail jackrabbits are fairly large, weighing from 3 to 7 pounds. They are grayish-brown and have large, black-tipped ears and a black tip on their tails. The blacktail jackrabbit does not walk or run like other mammals. Jackrabbits use their hind legs to hop while balancing themselves with their front legs. A rabbit can run as fast as 18 miles per hour when chased by a predator. Blacktail jackrabbits are most active at night. Males are called bucks and females, does. You have probably seen one while hiking in the desert. Jackrabbits were an important food source for Indians that lived in the Mojave Desert.



MAMMALS

Kangaroo Rat

Kangaroo rats are not rats nor are they mice, they are actually related to ground squirrels and pocket gophers. They are only found west of the Mississippi. They live on the plains, prairies and in deserts. Kangaroo rats are nocturnal, burrowing animals. They live in underground tunnels which they use for sleeping and food storage. Kangaroo rats have fur-lined cheek pouches which they use to carry food. They eat mostly seeds and some greens. Some types of kangaroo rats never drink water. The kangaroo rat's body is pale yellow, tan or dark brown and the belly is white. The tail is usually dark with a white stripe on each side.



It uses its tail for balancing. When alarmed, they use their strong hind legs to escape. Some kangaroo rats can leap almost nine feet, suggesting how they got their name.

Habitat is the Key to Wildlife Survival

Habitat is an environment that supplies everything wildlife needs for life. When food, shelter, water and space are in good supply, they contribute to the well-being of wildlife. Here's how:

Food- Each type of animal will only eat certain foods. Some plants provide more nutritional value than others. Both the quantity and quality of the food is important.

Shelter- All wildlife needs cover for protection while feeding, sleeping, playing, traveling, etc. Cover can come in many forms such as vegetation, burrows and rocks.

Water- All wildlife needs water. There are many water sources such as rivers, lakes, rain, dew and snow. But water is still scarce in the desert.

Space- Overcrowding leads to competition among animals looking for food, water and shelter. For this reason, only a set number of animals can live in an area.

Without all these factors present and in the right quantities, wildlife could not survive.

MAMMALS



Desert Bighorn Sheep

Nevada's most famous animal is the desert bighorn sheep. It is the official state animal. In Nevada there are three distinct types of bighorn sheep:

California bighorn sheep are found in northwestern Nevada.

Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep are found in north-eastern Nevada.

Desert bighorn sheep are found in Southern Nevada.

The desert bighorn sheep can be seen in the Las Vegas area. You can often see these magnificent animals near Hoover Dam. Adult males, called rams, weigh from 150 to 200 pounds. Females, called ewes, are somewhat smaller. Baby sheep are called lambs and are normally born in May or June. Bighorn sheep are surefooted animals that can swiftly climb the mountains in which they live. They use their speed to escape from predators. Bighorns are brown to grayish-brown with white rumps. Rams have large, curled horns, and ewes have smaller, straighter horns. Bighorns normally travel in herds led by the eldest ewe. Rams separate from the herd during the summer months. The males return to join the ewes and lambs in the fall. Bighorn sheep can live as long as 14 years.



The Horns will Show You Their Age

All bighorn sheep have horns that grow throughout the animal's life. As the sheep grow older, their horns grow distinct rings which form each year. Counting these growth rings will tell you the bighorn's age. Telling the age of a ram is easier than determining the age of the ewe. This is because the horns of a ram are larger than a ewe's and have more growth during the year.

SPIDERS

Wind Scorpion



Wind scorpions are sometimes called sun scorpions, because most live in the desert. Though they have eight legs, they use the front two legs as feelers. They walk on the other six legs and run swiftly “like the wind”. Almost 120 kinds are found in North America. Wind scorpions have big appetites. They have large jaws and may even feed on small lizards. They usually hunt at night and rest under rocks during the day. Females bury their eggs and may guard them. Adults live less than a year.

Desert Tarantula

Desert tarantulas can get as large as four inches long. They have brownish-black hairy bodies and legs. In the dim light of sunset or near dawn, tarantulas come out to hunt food. They eat insects, lizards and other small animals. In the day, tarantulas hide in holes or under rocks. They do not like to attack humans. Usually their bite is no more poisonous than a bee sting. Female tarantulas may live for 20 years.



Wolf Spider



Wolf spiders are among the most common spiders. They run over the ground and rest under rocks. They have good vision and a highly developed sense of touch. Wolf spiders are opportunistic wanderer-hunters, pouncing upon prey as they find it or chasing it over short distances. When baby wolf spiders hatch, the mother carries them on her back. If any fall off, they climb up the mother’s legs again.

Brown Recluse

Brown recluses get their name because they like to hide. They usually live in houses on the floor or behind the furniture. Recluses are light or dark brown with long, thin, hairy legs. They have six eyes. The brown recluse is also called the violin spider because it has a violin-shaped mark on its back near its head. The recluse eats only other insects for food, but is also dangerous to humans. **DO NOT TOUCH!**



SPIDERS



Black Widow

Black widows spin webs that have no pattern to them. They catch insects, such as flies, for food in these webs. Widows often build their webs under objects in trash and in dumps. They like hot, dry places to live. The black widow has long thin legs. It is shiny black when seen from the top. The female also has a bright red hourglass shape on her stomach. The female has a poisonous bite. **DO NOT TOUCH!**

INSECTS

Tarantula Hawk

The tarantula hawk is a velvety black wasp with orange wings. It depends on the tarantula for its survival. The female tarantula hawk paralyzes the spider with its stinger. Then she quickly drags the spider inside her lair, lays an egg and covers the hole. When the egg hatches, the larva feeds on the spider. When it is full grown, the tarantula hawk feeds on plant nectar.



Scorpion



Scorpions have pincers and a long tail with a stinger at its tip. Though they have many eyes, they do not see well. When running, they hold their pincers out. Males have broader pincers and longer tails than females. Like wolf spiders, scorpions feed at night on insects. The mother also carries her babies on her back until they shed their first skins. Scorpions are found all over the world, but most like to live in warm, dry climates such as the desert. Scorpions sting to defend themselves. **DO NOT TOUCH!**

Sphinx moths sound like hummingbirds as they visit garden flowers at sunset or at night. Their large wings and bodies are light brown with white stripes. The smaller wings are pink. This moth is also called the “tomato horn worm” because the caterpillar feeds on tomato and potato plants. The large, green caterpillar has a long “needle” at its end. This is not a stinger but is used to frighten away its enemies.



INSECTS



Monarch Butterfly

The monarch butterfly has orange and black wings. Monarchs fly north every spring and return south every fall. The same butterflies do not return, but their children do. The monarch caterpillar is yellow and black striped. In some parts of the world, monarchs are protected by law.

Cicada

In July and August, buzzy calls sound during the heat of the day. They get louder, then softer, over and over again. That noise is the male cicadas letting the silent females know where they are. Female cicadas make a cut in a twig and lay their eggs in it. The eggs hatch into little nymphs which drop to the ground. These young dig into the ground and eat the soft roots of trees and plants. They live underground for the next four or five years, eating all the time. When they are fully grown, the Cicadas come out of the ground at night in the early summer. They crawl part way up a tree, their skin splits open and the full-grown Cicada crawls out. You have probably seen the empty skins on fences, trees and walls.



PLANTS



Desert Plants Bite Back

Have you ever wondered why so many desert plants have sharp spines or thorns? Since many animals eat plants for food, fewer plants growing in a desert mean that less food is available. The spines and thorns on a plant help to protect it from being eaten by most animals. This give the cacti a chance to grow and produce seeds.

Cactus have two kinds of spines; the long, hard spines which are easy to see, and tiny hair-like spines that are hard to see. Both kinds hurt and are hard to get out of your skin. **DO NOT TOUCH!**

PLANTS

Desert plants are able to survive the extreme heat and drought (many days without rain) in several ways. Some plants grow quickly and produce seeds during a wet season. The seeds stay on the ground during the drought, and the new plants grow in the next rainy season. Examples of these type of plants are grasses and tumbleweeds.

Some plants become dormant during the hot dry months by dropping their leaves. Plants lose water by evaporation through their leaves so a plant without leaves can conserve its water. Many plants, such as the Creosote bush, have small leaves coated with wax or oily resin to keep water inside. Some plants, such as the desert mallow, also have tiny hairs that shade the leaf surface and catch raindrops. The cactus has spines that shade the stem. Some plants store water in thick stems or underground roots. The cactus, for example, uses this stored water later to help it through the hot, dry spells.

Desert plants, such as the mesquite, may have roots that reach great depths to find underground water supplies. Some plants have roots that spread out in broad shallow mats to collect as much rain water as possible that hits the ground. The Creosote bush may produce chemicals that keep other plants from growing near it, so it does not have to compete for water.

Cacti are probably the plants that are best suited for desert life. The leaves are modified into spines that shade the plant from the sun and protect it from animals. The stem performs the function of leaves, making food, so there is no need for many leaves that could lose water. A waxy coating on the plant helps to keep water inside the thick stems. Cacti send out long roots with thin threads that grow very

quickly to take up as much water as possible when it rains. When the desert gets hot and dry, these threads dry out and fall off to conserve the plants energy.



Creosote



Mesquite



Silver Cholla

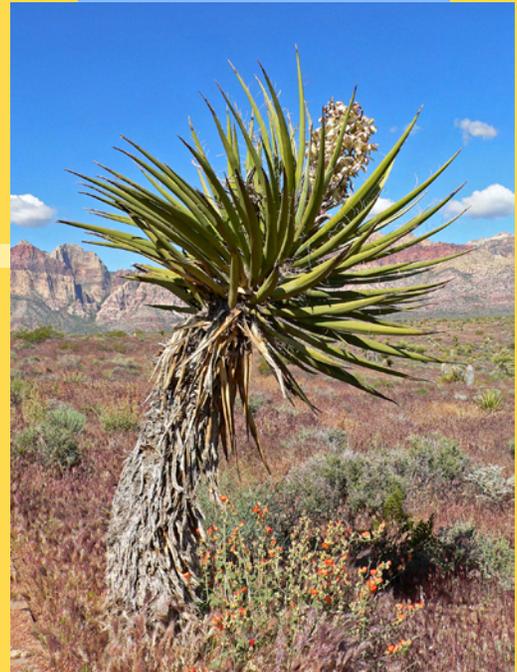
PLANTS

Joshua Tree



This plant is found only in the Mojave Desert. It is not really a tree because there is no wood in it. To conserve energy, the Joshua tree does not bloom every year. It waits until conditions are right. Water is stored in its thick, spongy “trunk”. Indians used many parts of the Joshua tree.

Mojave Yucca



The Mojave yucca is a close relative to the Joshua tree. This yucca is also called “Spanish dagger”. It branches from its base so it looks like a cluster of separate plants growing together. The fibers were used by Native Americans to make rope, sandals and cloth, while the fruit could be eaten and the seeds were ground to make flour.

Slow To Grow

In the desert, things grow slowly because of the hot, dry conditions. It may take 20 years for a cactus to grow one foot tall. Seeds may stay in the ground for ten years before they start to grow. When something dies, it takes a long time to decay in the desert. The decay of dead plants and animals adds nutrients back into the soil and new plants need these nutrients to grow.

Strawberry Hedgehog Cactus



This plant is also called the “calico cactus” because of the different colored spines. This cactus grows with a cluster of cucumber-shaped stems. Its bright pink flowers produce a fruit that tastes like strawberries.

PLANTS

Barrel Cactus



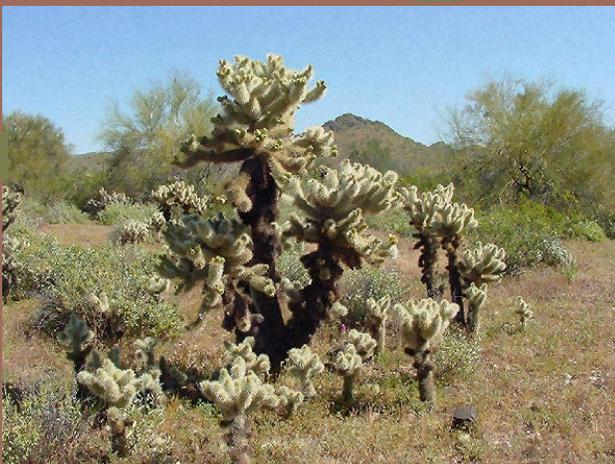
Perhaps the most recognized cactus in Las Vegas is the barrel cactus. It is not hollow, as many believe, but has a spongy pulp inside. When growing, most barrel cactus lean to the South to prevent sunburn. It is also known as the bisnaga, red barrel, fire barrel and compass barrel cactus. The barrel cactus can live to 130 years.

Prickly Pear Cactus

There are many kinds of prickly pear cactus (nearly every state has a native species). Most can be recognized by the flattened stems, called pads, that grow from joints. Indians would carefully scrape or burn off the spines and cook the pads for food. The egg-shaped fruits, called tunas, can still be found in some grocery stores. Along with the spines the cactus also has tiny hair-like spines called glochid.



Cholla Cactus



The cholla (pronounced “choh-yah”) cactus has jointed stems that are tubular. These joints can break off and take root in the ground to grow a whole new cholla cactus. After the plant dies, a skeleton of “ventilated wood” remains in the desert. There are many different kinds of cholla in the Mojave Desert. One is called the “teddy bear” cactus because it looks soft and furry from a distance. But don’t be fooled, they have very sharp spines.

PLANTS



Desert Marigold

This common plant has one-inch-wide yellow flowers. These flowers look like small sunflowers on tall stalks. The marigold's fuzzy leaves grow at its base.

Paper Flower



This plant is similar to the desert marigold. When its flowers dry, they rustle in the breeze. It sounds like papers being shuffled. The narrow, woolly leaves are scattered along the stems.



Indian Paint Brush

The flowers of this small colorful plant are barely visible. A "brush" of bright orange or red surrounds the tiny flowers. The top of the plant looks as if it has been dipped in paint.

Desert Trumpet

"Bladderstem" is another name for this funny-looking plant. Its stems are swollen and hollow at the top. The base is surrounded by leaves that lay flat on the ground. A network of thin branches rests on the main stem. The branches have tiny yellow flowers at their tips.



PLANTS

Sacred Datura



This plant is unusual for the desert. The datura is a vine-like plant with large grey-green leaves. The flowers look like large white trumpets, several inches long. It is sometimes called the “moon-lily” because the flowers open at night. This is when the giant sphynx moth pollinates the flowers. It is also known as “Jimson-weed” named after Jamestown, Virginia where British Soldiers were drugged by the plant on accident or “thornapple” because of its round, spiny seed pod. All parts of this plant are **POISONOUS!**

Globe Mallow

The mallow is common on roadsides and in disturbed soils. This plant has orange flowers and fuzzy leaves. The star-shaped hairs may get in your eyes if you handle the plant. That is why it is called the “sore-eye poppy”.



Mesquite



The mesquite is one of the most common desert trees. It usually grows along washes or dry stream beds. The mesquite has large, straight thorns on its branches. This tree’s seed pods look like string beans. The pods are sweet and are eaten by many animals. The pods turn hard and yellowish when dry. The Indians ate the pods, and used the sap as candy, glue and black dye.

PLANTS

Creosote Bush



This large shrub has small, round leaves which look and feel oily or sticky. This coating called lac, helps to keep water from being lost to the dry air. Indians used lac as glue. Mexicans called this plant “little stinker.” When it rains in the desert, the strong sweet smell is caused by the wet creosote leaves.

Catclaw Acacia

This shrub is common in the Las Vegas Valley. It has short curved thorns which easily can catch your skin or clothes. This shrub’s flowers look like pale yellow, fuzzy caterpillars. Its seed pods are short, flattened and twisted.



Russian Thistle



Commonly called “tumbleweed”, this is a non-native species to America, it was brought here accidentally from Europe. It has adapted very well to the desert and ranges of the West. When the plant matures, the branches dry and curl inward, forming a large ball. This ball breaks at the root and scatters its seeds as it tumbles across the ground, carried by the wind.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE



DESERT



National Park Service

PLACES TO VISIT

RED ROCK CANYON VISITOR CENTER
SPRING MOUNTAIN RANCH STATE PARK
ALAN BIBLE VISITOR CENTER, LAKE MEAD NRA
VALLEY OF FIRE STATE PARK
DESERT NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, CORN CREEK
SPRINGS PRESERVE
NEVADA STATE MUSEUM
KIWANIS WATER CONSERVING LANDSCAPE
DEMONSTRATION PARK
UNLV MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
LOST CREEK CHILDRENS TRAIL, RED ROCK CANYON

BOOKS TO READ

BIRDS AND MAMMALS

WHAT IS A BIRD? BY WESTERN PUBLISHING COMPANY
WHAT IS A MAMMAL? BY WESTERN PUBLISHING COMPANY
GOLDEN GUIDE TO MAMMALS BY GOLDEN PRESS

INSECTS, REPTILES AND SNAKES

WHAT IS AN INSECT? BY WESTERN PUBLISHING COMPANY
GOLDEN GUIDE TO INSECTS BY GOLDEN PRESS
SNAKES, LIZARDS AND TURTLES OF THE LAKE MEAD REGION, BY
WESTERN NATIONAL PARKS ASSOCIATION

FLOWERS AND PLANT LIFE

FLOWERS OF THE SOUTHWESTERN DESERTS BY MATT N. DODGE
FLOWERING PLANTS OF THE LAKE MEAD REGION BY EARL JACKSON
USES OF CALIFORNIA PLANTS BY EDWARD K. BALLS
AUDUBON SOCIETY NATURE GUIDE TO DESERTS BY JAMES A. MACMAHN
WHAT IS A FLOWER? BY WESTERN PUBLISHING COMPANY