

Desert Dweller Cards

Mesquite -- Mezquite -- Kui

The mesquite is one of our most common desert trees. It has dark-colored bark and tiny, feather-like leaves. Its tiny leaves help it to conserve water and if it gets hot and dry for too long, the mesquite will drop its leaves. Mesquites also have very long, deep roots which “tap” into ground water. Although mainly a desert dweller, mesquites also live in moist areas just up from the water’s edge, sometimes forming thick forests called bosques. Numerous birds including roadrunners, hawks, and owls make their nest in the limbs of the mesquite tree. Harris’ antelope squirrels, coyotes, and many other animals eat the sweet pods and protein-rich beans.

Cholla -- Choya -- Ciolim

Several types of cholla cactus live in the desert with names like teddybear, buckhorn, and chain-fruit. Like most cactus, cholla have spines which help shade the plant and protect its juicy insides from being eaten. Chollas have jointed stems but no true leaves. They store water in their stems and sometimes, small rodents are able to eat through the spines to get their moist flesh. Several birds, including the cactus wren, build nests among the cholla’s branches and spines. There are really no chollas that “jump” but the joints fall off very easily when brushed and may cling to whatever knocked them off. If a joint lands in a good place, it may grow into a new cholla cactus! Packrats will often collect the fallen joints and place them on their nests for added protection.

Palo Verde -- Palo Verde -- Ko’okmadk

Palo verde means “green stick” in Spanish -- which is a very good description of this tree. The trunk and limbs are all green! It is green because it has chlorophyll in its bark which allow it to carry on photosynthesis (make food) when the tree loses its leaves during dry periods. The palo verde also has very tiny leaves which help them to conserve water. Their roots are very shallow, just a few inches under the ground. This desert plant is well adapted to living in areas with little water. Palo verdes are sometimes called “nurse trees” since they help young saguaros get a start in life by providing shade. Many small animals including rodents and rabbits eat the seeds of the palo verde.

Brittlebush -- Incienso

The grayish-green leaves of the brittlebush are covered with short hairs that insulate the plant from both heat and cold. The plant normally grows in a dome shape and may be over two feet tall. During a drought, the plant may drop its leaves. Brittlebush plants that are leafless may look dead, but they are probably just waiting for the next good rain. The rich smelling sap of this desert plant has long been used as incense in Mexican churches. Brittlebush plants have brilliant yellow flowers which are a favorite food of many desert herbivores.

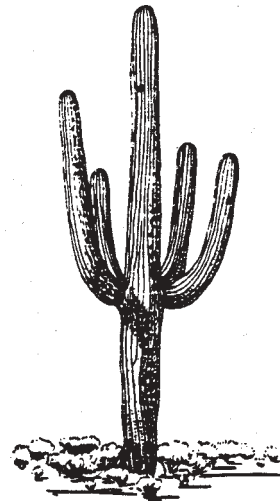
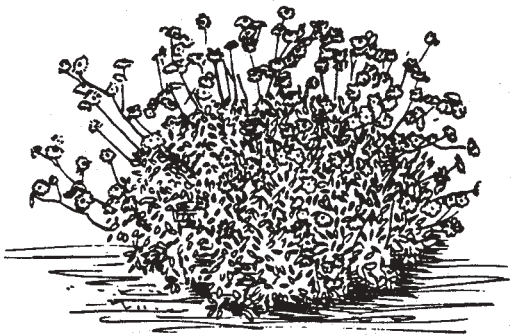
Saguaro -- Saguaro -- Ha:sañ

The saguaro is the tallest cactus in the Sonoran Desert. It has been known to reach heights of up to 50 feet. Surprisingly, it has a shallow root system. However, the roots are very long and vast for collecting water. The “pleats” in its body can expand like an accordion to store water from the rainy season. Each ridge of the saguaro has a row of spines which provide protection and shade. The saguaro relies on bats, insects, and birds to pollinate its flowers. Many birds make their homes in the saguaro including the Gila woodpecker, elf and screech owls, and even an occasional red-tailed hawk. In June and July the fruits ripen and are gathered by the Tohono O’odham. A saguaro rib is used to reach the top of the plant and knock down the fruits. Many animals also eat the ripe fruit when they fall to the ground.

Creosote -- Gobernadora, Hediondilla -- Segai

Creosote is one of the most common plants in the Sonoran Desert. Many people know the creosote by its smell. After a rain, this plant fills the desert air with a delightful odor. You can also cup your hands around a cluster of leaves and blow breath on them to get the same effect. The odor comes from a protective coating on the leaves which helps them to conserve water. Like many desert plants, the creosote has tiny leaves. Its small, yellow flowers bloom mainly in spring, but may also bloom throughout the year. Numerous small mammals, snakes and lizards find shelter under the branches of this plant.

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Ocotillo -- Ocotillo -- Melhog

The ocotillo is an interesting looking plant whose long branches all start near the ground and reach into the sky, often over 15 feet high. When dry, the ocotillo looks like a bunch of dead sticks with thorns. When it gets enough water, each of the ocotillo's branches becomes green and lush with new leaves. When it gets hot and dry again, the ocotillo's leaves will turn yellow then brown and drop off. The plant is fine after loosing its leaves, this is its way of conserving water. Ocotillo flowers are a magnificent red-orange color and attract a variety of hummingbirds and butterflies. The flowers can also be used to make a tea. Harris' antelope squirrels have been known to climb the branches to eat the flowers and seeds. The branches of the ocotillo are also used to make fences. When an ocotillo stick is planted in the ground, it may take root and survive.

Prickly Pear Cactus -- Nopal --

'I :bhai naw

The prickly pear cactus is well known by most people who live in the desert. It is a vital plant to the many desert dwellers who either eat its pads or fruit. Most prickly-pear have spines which protect the fleshy insides but some animals are able to eat the pads, spines and all! Packrats, javelina, desert tortoises, and sometimes rabbits will eat the fleshy pads and fruit. Packrats and a variety of birds may nest among the pads. Humans collect and eat the fruit as well as the tender, young pads which are called "nopalitos". This wild food from the desert is often available in local markets.

Ironwood -- Palo Fierro -- Ho'idkam

Ironwood trees have been called the "Desert Tree of Life." There are many plants and animals that have some type of relationship with the ironwood. The ironwood provides nesting places for numerous birds including roadrunners, doves, owls and hawks. It also provides shade to other young plants such as saguaro and cholla and is considered a "nurse tree" like the palo verde. The ironwood tree is so named because the wood is very hard and dense, like iron. Ironwood is so heavy that it will not float in water. It has tiny leaves like the palo verde and mesquite and is also good at surviving with very little water. In early summer, the beautiful purple blossoms of the ironwood appear.

Red-Tailed Hawk -- Halcon de Cola Roja -- Haupal

The red-tailed hawk is a large hawk with a body built for soaring. Its wide, fanning wingspan may be over 4 feet wide. This bird-of-prey needs large, open spaces for hunting small mammals, snakes, and other ground-dwelling animals. It has several adaptations to help it catch and eat its prey. The red-tailed hawk has keen eyes to help it spot prey. They also have strong, sharp talons to hold and kill prey, and a sharp, curved beak to rip into meat. It will perch atop tall saguaros, trees, or telephone poles waiting for prey to move below. It will also soar above the ground in search of unsuspecting prey. Only the adult red-tailed hawk has the reddish tail; birds under a year have brown and white banded tails. Red-tailed hawks live all across the United States in a variety of habitats.

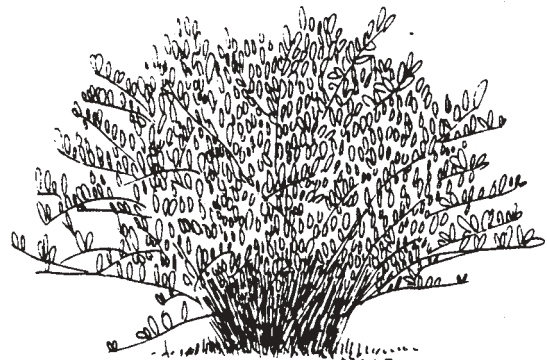
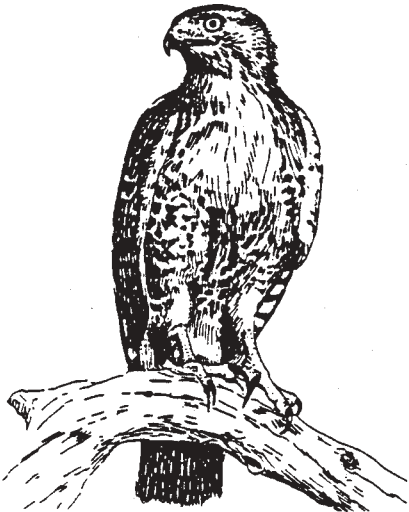
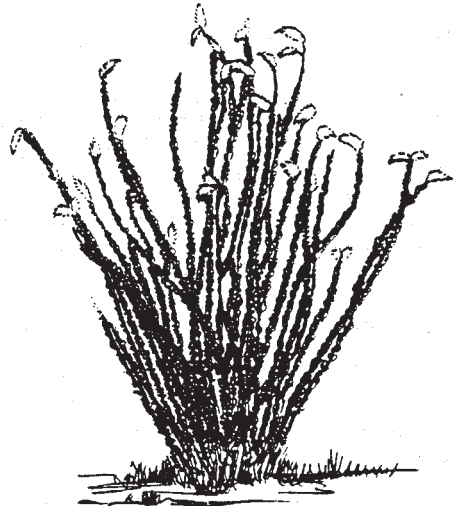
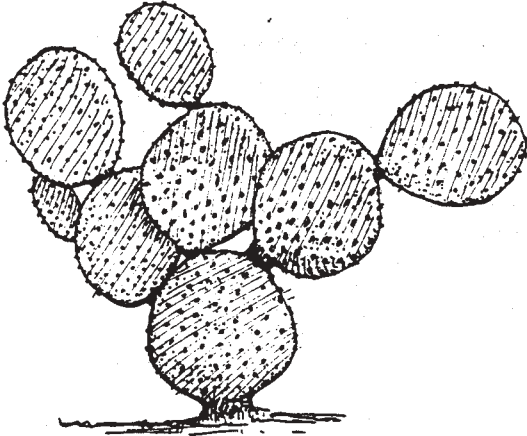
Jojoba -- Jojoba

Jojoba is a common plant in desert canyons and well drained sandy soils at canyon mouths. Jojoba plants grow to be 2-10 feet tall and have leathery, grayish-green leaves that stay on the plant all year. Deer often feed on the leaves of the jojoba. Jojoba are best known for their acorn like fruits which were an important food source for desert people. The jojoba nut contains an unusual oil, almost like a liquid wax. Today, it is used in the making of shampoo and skin cream. The jojoba nut may also be roasted and used as a substitute for coffee. Small mammals like packrats, kangaroo rats, coyotes and Harris' antelope squirrels depend on these rich and tasty nuts to survive the Sonoran Desert summer.

Collared Lizard -- Lagartija de Collar

This rock dwelling lizard is frequently found in canyons, rocky cliffs and mountain slopes where vegetation is sparse and lots of lookout and basking sites can be found. Collared lizards warm themselves in the early morning sun, and remain active throughout the morning and early part of the day. They can be seen running from rock to rock in search of insects to eat. In turn, they are eaten by roadrunners, hawks, and sometimes mammals like a fox or coyote. Collared lizards will also feed on desert fruits when they are available. The adults can be very aggressive and will at times attack a lizard many times their own size. Generally when cornered they will flee rather than fight. When they really get going, a collared lizard may rear up onto its hind legs to run.

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Roadrunner -- Churea, Correcaminos -- Tadaí

Roadrunners are ground dwelling birds that seldom fly. When one is surprised or startled it will usually run away on its strong legs. Roadrunner tracks (footprints) are easy to identify because two of their toes point forward and the other two point backward. This arrangement helps them run extremely fast to chase and catch their prey. In addition to long legs, roadrunners also have a long tail. Their bodies are mainly streaky black and white all over with a patch of blue and orange behind their eyes. Roadrunners also have a crest on their heads. A roadrunner's diet consists of a variety of desert animals including small snakes, lizards, mice, and insects. Roadrunners build their nest of twigs in trees or even in a cholla cactus.

Harris' Antelope Squirrel -- Juancito, Ardilla Llanera

The Harris' antelope squirrel is often mistaken for a chipmunk. It has a white stripe along each side of its grayish body. This ground squirrel is well adapted to desert conditions and is active even during the heat of a summer day. Like many small desert mammals, it has very efficient kidneys which help it conserve water and it gets most of its moisture from the food it eats. The squirrel eats the fruit and seeds of mesquite, palo verde and ironwood. Although mainly a plant eater, Harris' antelope squirrels will also eat insects and occasionally carrion. It is preyed on by snakes, coyotes, and hawks.

Western Diamondback Rattlesnake -- Vibora de Cascabel -- Ko'owi

The Western Diamondback is the largest western rattlesnake, averaging 3 to 5 feet in length. It is the most common rattlesnake in the Sonoran Desert but is also found in a variety of other habitats. It feeds mainly on rats and mice, but will also eat larger mammals like the cottontail rabbit. Rattlesnakes may use their venom to protect themselves but it evolved for them to subdue their prey. When the rattlesnake is disturbed, it will coil its body and rattle its tail as a warning. Rattlesnakes will lay in the sun to warm up on cool days, but seek out shade when the temperature gets hot. In the winter, they find a safe place to "hibernate" until spring returns.

Horned Lizard -- Camaleon -- Cemamagi

The horned lizard is often called the "horny toad" although it isn't a toad at all. It is a lizard which has an unusually round, flat body. Horned lizards eat many different types of insects but they especially like ants. They will sit quietly by an ant hill and nab the ants with their long, sticky tongue. The blotchy, tan color of the horned lizard's scales help them blend in with their surroundings. Even though they are well camouflaged, animals such as hawks, snakes, and coyotes sometimes spot the horned lizard and eat them. Horned lizards have a special trick which sometimes help them escape if captured. They have the ability to squirt blood from their eyes, which may irritate a predator if it contacts sensitive parts of the face.

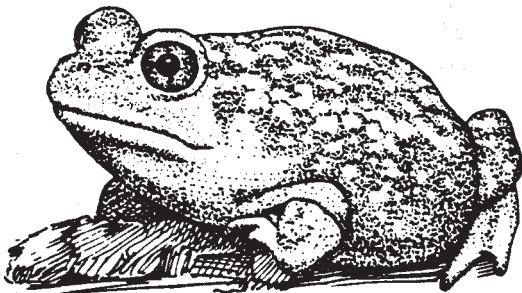
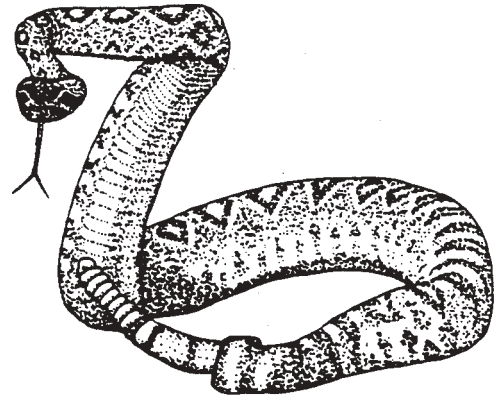
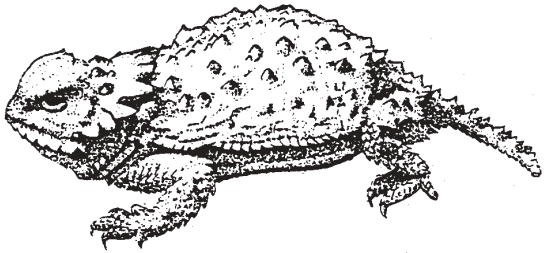
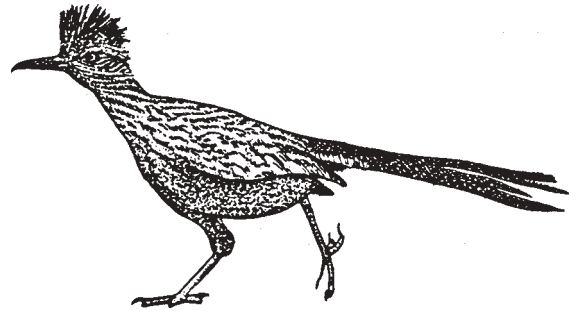
Gila Woodpecker

This desert dwelling woodpecker most often nests in holes it makes in saguaro cactus (but may also nest in other large trees). Its strong, pointy beak helps it drill these holes. Like most woodpeckers, the Gila woodpecker mainly eats insects which it finds on and under the bark of trees but it will also eat the fruits of the saguaro. Look for the black and white bars on the Gila woodpecker's back. Males also have a red cap on their otherwise grayish-brown head. The cavity created inside a saguaro cactus is often used by other desert animals after the woodpecker abandons it.

Spade-foot Toad - Sapo con Espuelas -- Babad

The spade foot toad was named for the little shovel-like pads on its hind legs. These hard "spades" help the toad dig into the soil where it lives in a sleep-like state during the hot, dry times of the year. When the summer rains come, the toads dig out of their burrows and begin calling to find a mate. The toads will gather around temporary rain puddles and lay their eggs which quickly hatch into tadpoles. The tadpoles grow quickly, becoming adult toads in about two weeks. Like most toads, spadefoots eat insects, nabbing them with their long tongues. They are eaten by a variety of predators including birds, snakes, and coyotes.

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Turkey Vulture -- Zopilote -- Ñuwi

Turkey vultures play a very important role in the natural environment. With their keen eyesight and sense of smell, they seek out dead animals which they eat. Eating dead animals provides an important cleaning service in nature! The turkey vulture has a "bald," red head which, because it lacks feathers, stays clean while eating. Look for turkey vultures soaring in the sky or perched atop trees and cliffs. An easy way to identify a soaring turkey vulture is to look for their distinct wings. The rear portion of the wing is lighter in color than the front portion.

Javelina -- Jabali -- Ko:ji

The javelina is not a pig, it is its own distinct kind of animal. However, it does have a very pig-like appearance. The diet of a javelina consists of many different things. They will eat prickly-pear pads, roots, insects, grasses, shrubs and the occasional carrion. Javelina have long, tusk-like canine teeth which help them to dig in the ground and as well as to shred cactus pads. While javelina get a great deal of moisture from the foods they eat, they will drink free water daily if it is available to them. Javelina travel in small herds, seeking shade under desert trees in the heat of day.

Mexican Long-tongued Bat -- Murcielago Narigudo -- Nanakumal

The Mexican long-tongued bat has a very long tongue which it uses to eat its favorite food: nectar. It especially loves the nectar from saguaro and organpipe cactuses but also gets nectar from the flowers of agave. This little, flying mammal spends its winters in Mexico and its summers in the northern parts of Mexico and southern Arizona. The females raise their young in nursery caves. The Mexican long-tongued bat is considered to be an endangered species in Arizona. This is due to many reasons such as roosting and nursery caves that have been disturbed by humans and destruction of their food plants (saguaro and agaves) for development.

Harvester Ant -- Hormiga Arriera -- Kudagi

Harvester ants live in large groups in underground tunnels. Because they live in colonies, they are called "social" insects. The ants all work together for the good of the colony. They are called harvester ants because they scout the surrounding desert for plant parts, especially seeds, which they collect or "harvest" and bring back to their extensive tunnels. One can often see parts of plants they have gathered surrounding their ant "hill." Insect eaters such as horned lizards and birds eat harvester ants. Harvester ants are capable of both biting and stinging.

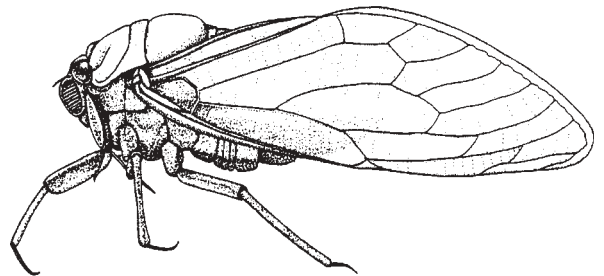
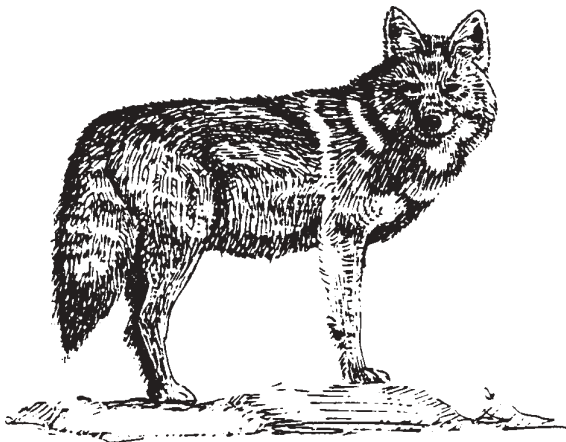
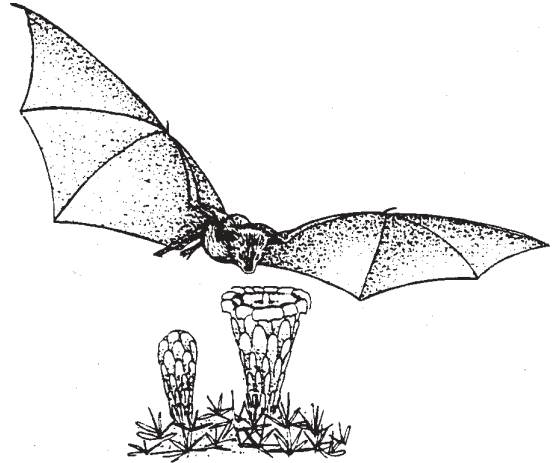
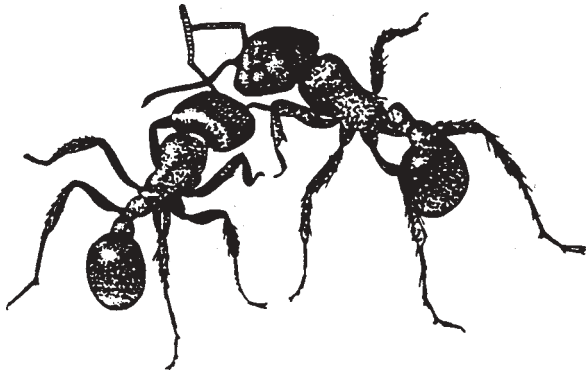
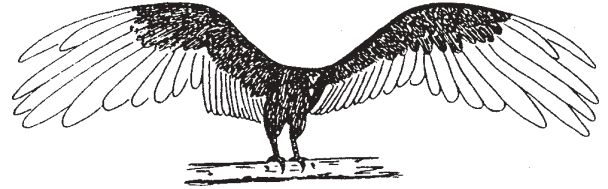
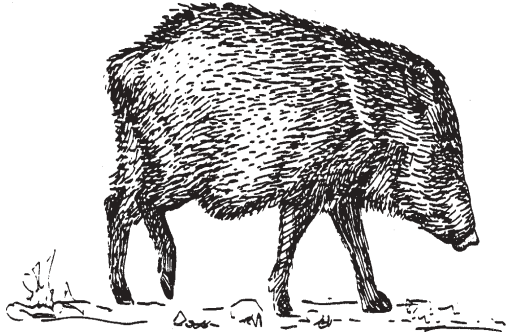
Cicada -- Chicharra

Cicadas are insects that are more frequently heard than seen. The male cicada can be heard emitting a continuous high pitched mating call that some people find disturbing. Cicada nymphs (young) spend their entire lives underground. They make smooth tunnels through the earth to reach their favorite food of plant roots. The nymphs eventually transform into adults and begin looking for mates. After mating, the female places her eggs into a twig. As the young nymphs hatch they fall to the ground and quickly dig down into the ground to begin another cycle.

Coyote -- Coyote -- Ban

The coyote is truly a desert omnivore. Its diet consists of snakes, jackrabbits, cottontails, insects and rodents as well as a variety of vegetation such as mesquite beans, seed pods and cactus fruit. The coyotes teeth are especially adapted for its varied diet. Large, sharp canine teeth are used to kill and tear into the meat of its prey. The teeth just behind the canines are called premolars and are used for cutting, they work much like a pair of scissors. The teeth in the rear of the jaw are called molars and they are used for chewing and grinding.

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Great-horned Owl -- Tecalote Orejuda -- Cukud

The great-horned owl is the largest owl found in the Sonoran Desert. It does not really have horns, rather it has feathery tufts on the top of its head. Some people think these feathers are its ears but the ears are actually located inside the facial ruff and are not visible. The great-horned owl has excellent hearing and keen vision, which makes it very good at night-time hunting. Like hawks and eagles, the great-horned owl is a bird-of-prey. Its diet consist primarily of small mammals such as rodents. Great-horned owls are also one of the primary predators of skunks.

Desert Tortoise -- Tortuga del Desierto -- Komckud

With its hard outer shell it is said that the desert tortoise carries its home on its back. However, desert tortoises actually dig burrows and find shelters in rocky crevices where they spend most of their lives. Its shell is mainly to protect it from the many animals that would like to eat it. Mountain lions are one of the few animals able to penetrate the hard shell of an adult tortoise. Desert tortoises are well adapted to life in the desert. They get most of their water from the food they eat which includes grasses, desert shrubs, and the fruit of the prickly pear and saguaro cacti.

Packrat -- Rata -- Koson

Although packrats are a common rodent in the Sonoran Desert, they are rarely seen as they are nocturnal. During the day, they hide in their nests, which are called middens, for protection. Packrats are known to collect all kinds of objects to build their middens, often build them within a prickly pear cactus. They especially like cholla joints and pieces of wood, which they place on their middens for protection. Packrats eat a variety of foods such as the seeds of mesquite, ironwood, and palo verde. They also nibble on the succulent flesh of saguaro and prickly pear cacti and eat their fruit when it is ripe. Another name for the packrat is the white-throated woodrat.

Kangaroo Rat -- Rata Canguro -- Dahiwua

The kangaroo rat is a clever desert dweller. It has many ways of conserving water and keeping cool in the desert environment. The kangaroo rat lives in an underground burrow and is active at night when temperatures are cooler. The kangaroo rat is also able to get most of its water from the dry seeds it eats. Kangaroo rats got their name from their long legs and hopping habit -- almost like tiny kangaroos. Their hopping is one way for them to escape being eaten by owls, snakes and coyotes, which are the kangaroo rat's main predators.

Black-tailed Jackrabbit -- Liebre de Cola Negra -- Cu:wi

The black-tailed jackrabbit is a well known desert dweller. Jackrabbits eat grasses and small plants but have been known to graze on desert shrubs including creosote. Jackrabbits have large eyes and they are always on the lookout for predators that might eat them such as coyotes and red-tailed hawks. Jackrabbits may be active during the day or night. They seek out the shade of bushes or trees when daytime temperatures are high. The over-sized ears of a jackrabbit also help to keep it cool. When wind blows over their ears, the blood inside the vessels is cooled down before returning to the body.

Mule Deer -- Venado Bura -- Huawi

Mule deer were named for their large ears, which resemble those of a mule. Mule deer are herbivores, which means that they only eat plants. They are also browsers, which means they primarily feed on the leaves and twigs of shrubs and bushes. However, they will also eat grass, fruit, mesquite beans, vines and the leaves of trees. Although many people say that deer have horns, they actually have antlers. Unlike the deer family, both male and female mule deer grow horns, which are retained throughout their lifetime. Only male mule deer grow antlers, which are grown and shed on a yearly cycle. While coyotes occasionally prey on mule deer, their primary predator is the mountain lion.

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