



Ten Most Common Reptiles of White Sands



Many people believe the desert is a barren, dry place with little life. Wrong! A desert does have scorching sun and little rain; however, many animals both survive and thrive within White Sands National Monument. Below is a list of 10 of our most common snakes and lizards that you may see within the monument. Do not try to handle any wildlife as some are very venomous.

Bleached Earless Lizard (*Holbrookia maculata ruthveni* or Lesser Earless Lizard)

At about four-inches long, the bleached earless lizard isn't really earless or bleached. It doesn't have any external ear openings, and lighter colors blend better into the environment, making darker lizards easier prey. Found throughout the dunefield, these lizards like to bury themselves just under the surface in loose, sandy soil.

They are identifiable by two black spots on each side.



Greater Earless Lizard (*Cophosaurus texanus*)

When it feels threatened, the six-inch long greater earless lizard dives under sand and is a great insect hunter. During the spring and summer mating seasons, territorial "dances" involving head bobbing and leg lifting take place. Both lesser and greater earless lizards are found throughout the dunefield and are the only lizards at White Sands that play dead when captured and then "spring back to life" to escape.

Both the male and female can be identified by two black crescents along the sides of their bellies close to their hind legs.



Little Striped Whiptail (*Cnemidophorus inornatus*)

Often called "little blue-tails", these insect eaters have blue faces, necks, and bellies and grow up to seven inches long. One of the most common lizards around the visitor center, little striped whiptails detach and drop their tails if grabbed by a predator. The tail will regrow.



Common Side-Blotched Lizard (*Uta stansburiana*)

At about 5.5-inches and found all around the monument, this is the only lizard at White Sands that is apt to be active on warm days year-round. It is identifiable by a single dark blotch just behind each foreleg. The males roam in an area of about 2,500-square yards and can be very territorial, especially during breeding season. Females lay up to

three clutches of two to five eggs a year.



Coachwhip or Western Coachwhip
(*Masticophis flagellum*)

Harmless to humans, the coachwhip is a long, slender tan or brown snake that can reach up to seven feet in length. Most of the coachwhips at White Sands have a pink color on the belly that becomes more pronounced under the tail. This snake shows a nasty temper when capture is attempted. In captivity, while holding its head still, the coachwhip will whip its tail back and forth around the edges of its cage to

dislodge any lizards hiding there. When the lizard moves, it becomes a meal. It is believed the same technique is used in the wild.



Plains Black-Headed Snake
(*Tantilla nigriceps*)

The Plains black-headed snake is slender with a tan, red-brown, or cream body and a dark brown or black head cap that narrows to a point on the back of the head. Although mildly venomous, it is harmless to humans. Living in underground burrows, the 12-inch long snake is nocturnal and eats only invertebrates. In late spring or early

summer, females will lay a clutch of up to three eggs.



Sonoran Gopher Snake
(*Pituophis catenifer affinis*)

This large, heavy-bodied snake averages about four feet in length but can grow up to seven feet. The underbelly of those in White Sands is often creamy as opposed to yellow, beige, or tan as it is in other areas. A constrictor, the Sonoran gopher snake is harmless to humans and eats small mammals, birds and their eggs, and even lizards. However, the preferred prey of choice at White Sands is the pocket gopher. A diurnal creature, this snake is most active in the early morning

and late afternoon; prefers to avoid the mid-day heat by hiding in rodent burrows. Docile by nature, the gopher snake can put on a rattlesnake-like display if cornered.



Prairie Rattlesnake
(*Crotalus viridis*)

A three- to four- foot long pit-viper, the prairie rattlesnake is found mostly in mesquite dunes and desert scrub habitats. Hibernating in winter, prairie rattlers often return to the same den year after year. When awake during warm months, they establish hunting territories and mainly eat lizards and small mammals. At White Sands, this snake can be pinkish to gray, tan, or brown. Oval blotches down the back can be broken or muted, creating an

indistinct pattern. The tail is also faintly banded, unlike the boldly contrasting black-and-white bands on the tail of the Western Diamondback.



Southwestern Plateau Lizard
(*Sceleporus undulatus cowlesi*)

This small lizard is only about three- to five- inches long. Found throughout White Sands, the Southwestern plateau lizard can be black to light brown to white, depending on where it's found. Males are easy to identify since they have bright blue belly patches, as well as blue or green chin patches. Although diurnal, this lizard prefers to avoid the mid-day heat of summer and is most active mid-morning and late afternoon.

Instead of actively hunting, it sits and waits for prey to wander by. Insects are its favorite meal, but it will eat wasps, spiders, snails, and other small lizards.



Checkered or Marbled Whiptail
(*Aspidoscella tessellata*)

Only two- to four- inches long, this lizard has at least six pale stripes on its yellow or cream upper body, which is marked by dark blotches in a checkered pattern. This all-female species reproduces via parthenogenesis, meaning the unfertilized egg develops into a new individual.

