

# The Herptile File

Big Basin Redwoods State Park  
Reptiles and Amphibians

# Amphibians and Reptiles...

What are those?

Amphibians are animals such as a frogs, toads, or salamanders.



Frog



Toad



Salamander

Reptiles are animals such as turtles, lizards, and snakes.



Turtle



Lizard



Snake

# But how are they different?

## Amphibians vs. Reptiles

- Amphibians aren't as picky eaters as reptiles.
- Salamanders (an amphibian) will chew on almost anything.
- Snakes (a reptile) must swallow their prey whole—they have a wide, moveable jaw.
- Another member of the reptile family, the lizard, has rigid jaws and takes little bites out of its food.

# Snakes vs. Salamanders

## **Snake:**

- Slithers along with horizontal scales that grip the ground
- “Hears” prey through delicate vibrations with its body through the ground
- “Smells” with its tongue, since its nose is in its mouth!

## **Salamander:**

- Starts life in water
- Favors moist habitats
- Lacks claws and scales
- Breathes through moist, soft skin
- Tongue is short and fat
- Some have very small or no feet
- Looks like a small snake

# Section One: Reptiles...



## Western Skink

(*Eumeces skiltonianus*)

- Skink: A slim-bodied lizard with smooth scales and small limbs
- Likes to eat insects and spiders
- Hard to spot!
  - Moves so quickly, will probably only see little blue tail
- Has a bright blue tail
  - Detaches to escape danger
  - Color fades with age





# Alligator Lizard

(*Gerrhonotus coeruleus* and *Gerrhonotus multicarinatus*)

- Common in moist forests
- Two local types make it difficult to tell apart
  - Different belly scale colors
  - **Southern Alligator Lizard:**
    - Stripes/dashed lines between rows of scales
  - **Northern Alligator Lizard:**
    - Dark line between rows of scales
- Careful: They bite!
  - As with any animal, just watch!





# Rubber Boa

(*Charina bottae*)

- Tube-shaped with blunt ends
  - Looks/feels like rubber
  - Smooth, shiny and grey (green/brown)
- Likes small mammals and lizards
- Kills prey by suffocation (constriction)
- Mostly active at night
  - Can be seen on overcast days
  - Can tolerate lower temperature than most snakes
- Tail looks like head
  - When threatened, will roll into ball and stick out tail as decoy





# Western, Pacific, or Northwestern Rattlesnake

(*Crotalus viridis*)

- Recognized by vibrating rattles and defensive coiled posture along with hissing and a flicked tongue
- Venom injected through hollow fangs (toxic to prey)
  - Most bites occur after attempts to hold/capture
- Swallows prey whole!
  - But what do rattlers eat?
    - Rats, mice, gophers, squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, lizards, frogs, and other snakes
    - Helps in rodent control
- New-born snakes just as poisonous as adults
  - Have fully-equipped fangs, venom, and button rattle



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# Western Fence Lizard

## "Blue Belly"

(*Sceloporus occidentalis*)

- Found in dry, open habitats
- Bright-blue belly marks
- Good climber
- Likes to bask in sun to warm up
- Does push-ups to reveal blue belly
  - Helps it to breathe



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# Ringneck Snake

(*Diadophis punctatus*)

- Small snake
- Easily identified by ring around neck and bright orange belly
- Fairly common, rarely seen
  - Likes to hide out in rotting logs, bark, or under rocks
- Likes bugs, small frogs and small salamanders
- When alarmed will coil tail to reveal bright belly
  - Distracts predators from its head





# Mountain Kingsnake

(*Lampropeltis zonata*)

Brilliant red color with black and white bands

- Moves so fast colors blur together or “grey out”
- Makes it less noticeable

- Three feet long
- Likes small mammals, birds, lizards, and other snakes
- Found in heavy thickets of chaparral, within rocks/hollow logs, or in streams and damp leaf litter
- Battle of the snakes: Kingsnake vs. Rattler
  - Known to fight each other
  - Kingsnake immune to rattler’s venom
  - Rattler tries to kill kingsnake by biting it, while kingsnake tries to kill rattler by constriction
  - In confusion, rattler might bite itself!



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# Gopher Snake

(*Pituophis melanoleucus*)

- Length: between 3 and 8 feet!
  - Six-footer recently found in Santa Cruz mountains
- Rattlesnake impersonator
  - Has flattened head to resemble a rattler
  - Will hiss, flick tongue, “rattle” its tail and strike!
    - (That is, if it’s in danger)
  - Tail moving in leaves sounds just like a rattler
- Kills prey by constriction (tightening coils and suffocating it)
- Most often found in meadows where prey is plentiful
  - Likes mice, squirrels, and gophers
- Uses head like shovel, moving dirt along coils until a burrow is found
  - Burrow used to keep cool or lay eggs



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# Western Garter Snake

(*Thamnophis elegans terrestris*)

- Long, slender snake with bright stripes down back
- Santa Cruz variety: symmetry around middle stripe, may have other stripes with different colors
  - Like a yellow line down its back, with red/orange flecks on side and belly
- Fast flicking, bright red tongue
- Loves moist, watery habitats
- Most commonly seen snake in Big Basin



# Section Two: Amphibians!



# Rough-Skinned Newt

(*Taricha granulosa*)

**Newt: A large salamander**

- Can be up to 8 inches long
- Yellow/orange belly; light brown to black above
- Teeth in upper jaw form a “V” shape
- Light brown
- Small eyes
- Poisonous
  - As with all animals in nature, better to just watch



# California Newt

(*Taricha torosa*)

- Large: Up to 8 inches long
- Can have a yellow/orange belly and brown black
- Looks like rough-skinned newt
  - Has lighter bellies/eyelids
  - Has larger eyes
- Found in coast ranges and fast-moving streams
- Can swim in larger streams
- Migrates at night during wet period (November-April)
- POISONOUS!!!
  - Better to just observe



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# Arboreal Salamander

*(Aneides lugubris)*

- Likes to climb trees
- Found on forest floor or inside rotting logs
- Has squared toes (for climbing)
- Tail adapted for seizing, grasping, and holding, especially by wrapping around an object (prehensile)
- Capable of inflicting a powerful bite
  - Males known to attack/scar another

Juvenile



Adult



# Pacific Giant or Marbled Salamander

(*Dicamptodon ensatus*)

- Chunky, smooth-skinned creature
- Color is brown marbled with spots of black/darker brown
- Flattened tail
- Can reach a foot in length
- One of the largest land salamanders in the world
- IT GROWLS!!!
  - Only salamander with vocal chords
  - Growls only if startled





## California Slender Salamander

*(Batrachoseps attenuatus)*

- Common in redwood forests and coast ranges
- Found during moist periods (October to May)
  - Usually found at night
- Known to enter termite tunnels



## California Giant Salamander

*(Dicamptodon ensatus)*

- Found in humid coastal forests, especially redwoods and riparian (near river/stream) habitats
- Likes to hide eggs below stream banks

