

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

TREE LIZARD

Urosaurus ornatus

Family: PHRYNOSOMATIDAE
R026

Order: SQUAMATA

Class: REPTILIA

Written by: R. Marlow
Reviewed by: T. Papenfuss
Edited by: S. Granholm

DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The tree lizard is narrowly distributed in California along the Colorado River and adjacent areas. It frequents elevated situations such as cliffs, rocks, ledges, bushes and trees. It prefers moister habitats and reaches greatest abundance in desert riparian, desert wash, and dense stands of shrubs. It is active in spring and summer, occasionally in early fall, but not in winter (Stebbins 1954, Milstead 1970, Vitt 1974, Martin 1977).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: This species feeds on spiders and insects such as beetles, ants, termites, lepidopterous larvae, hemipterans, homopterans and grasshoppers (Stebbins 1954, Milstead 1970). It commonly feeds in shrubs and trees and also on rocks, by sitting on an elevated perch and waiting for a prey item to approach.

Cover: This lizard spends much of its time climbing in vegetation or rocks. It shelters in vegetation, under rocks, and in rock crevices (Stebbins 1954, Milstead 1970, Vitt 1974).

Reproduction: This lizard lays eggs and presumably requires friable, sandy soil for nest construction. Multiple clutches are laid in years with above-normal rainfall (Fitch 1970).

Water: Prefers moister habitats and is often found near water, but whether this is a physiological or ecological requirement is not known.

Pattern: This small, cryptic lizard occurs in areas with elevated perch-sites of rocks, ledges, cliffs or vegetation.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: This lizard is diurnal and will usually feed during the entire day. It becomes active in early spring and remains abroad until early fall. In winter it forms wintering aggregations (Stebbins 1954, Vitt 1974).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: These lizards move to local wintering aggregations in the fall and spend the winter there. They move away from these aggregations in the spring. Movements are local (Vitt 1974).

Home Range: Nothing has been reported on the home range of this species. Any estimate would be complicated by the tendency to climb and incorporate the vertical dimension into activity areas.

Territory: Males defend territories. This lizard has a complicated social system that has not been completely studied (Milstead 1970).

Reproduction: Courtship begins in early April and proceeds through the summer. An average of 8 eggs is laid per clutch (range 5-12), and as many as 6 clutches may be produced (Stebbins 1954, Fitch 1970). This lizard has a high reproductive potential and seems to respond to increased rainfall, and presumably increased insect availability, by producing multiple clutches of eggs.

Niche: This lizard is known to compete with *Sceloporus merriami*. Favorable weather and insect production result in multiple clutches. The high reproductive potential suggests high rates of predation.

REFERENCES

- Fitch, H. S. 1970. Reproductive cycles in lizards and snakes. Univ. Kans. Mus. Nat. Hist. Misc. Publ. 52:1-247.
- Martin, R. F. 1973. Reproduction in the tree lizard (*Urosaurus ornatus*) in central Texas: drought conditions. *Herpetologica* 29:27-32.
- Martin, R. F. 1977. Variation in reproductive productivity of range margin tree lizards. *Copeia* 1977:83-92.
- Milstead, W. W. 1970. Late summer behavior of the lizards *Sceloporus merriami* and *Urosaurus ornatus* in the field. *Herpetologica* 26:341-357.
- Stebbins, R. C. 1954. Amphibians and reptiles of western North America. McGraw-Hill, New York. 536pp.
- Vitt, L. J. 1974. Winter aggregations, size classes and relative tail breaks in the tree lizard, *Urosaurus ornatus* (Sauria: Iguanidae). *Herpetologica* 30:182-183.

R026

Life history accounts for species in the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships (CWHHR) System were originally published in: Zeiner, D.C., W.F.Laudenslayer, Jr., K.E. Mayer, and M. White, eds. 1988-1990. California's Wildlife. Vol. I-III. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, California. Updates are noted in accounts that have been added or edited since original publication.