The Reptiles & Amphibians of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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Focus
Reptiles & Amphibians, Landscapes and Photography

Grading
Grade A/B - Easy-moderate walking with some rocky trails

Dates & Prices
See website (tour code USA19) or our brochure

Highlights
- Exciting herpetofauna at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument includes several iconic species including the Gila Monster, Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, Desert Tortoise and Western Coral Snake
- Search the amazing Chiricahua Mountains for Mojave Rattlesnakes, Alligator Lizards, and more
- Stay in the heart of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts among the Sky Islands.
Introduction

The Madrean Sky Islands are a world biodiversity hotspot in northwestern Mexico and the southwestern United States. This ecoregion is named for the 57 pine- and oak-studded mountain “islands” encompassed within and separated by desert and grassland “seas.” These isolated sky island mountains, ranging from 3,000 to over 10,000 feet (915 to 3300m) in elevation, connect the Colorado Plateau and temperate north with the Sierra Madre Occidental and neotropical south. Plants, animals, and habitats of the Great Plains grasslands, Sonoran Desert, and Chihuahuan Desert also connect and blend together here with the temperate and tropical.

The Madrean Sky Islands contain some of the most rugged and remote lands in the southwest and feature some of the highest levels of biodiversity in the world. More than 7,000 species of plants and animals, including over half of the birds in North America, can be found here. The 143 mile (230 km) stretch of the San Pedro River alone contains more native vertebrate species than Yellowstone National Park. In a day’s walk, you can climb through desert and scrubland habitats characteristic of central Mexico, up to mixed-conifer forests characteristic of Canada.

Because of this diversity of habitats, the Madrean Sky Islands of southeast Arizona have long fascinated herpetologists and is indeed herpetologically diverse. During the spring, reptiles are emerging from their winter hibernation to take advantage of the warming sun and abundant hunting. Iconic reptiles such as Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, Horned Lizard and Gila Monster can be found in these areas. Among amphibians, there are 24 anurans (frogs & toads) and one salamander. Among reptile species, 50 snakes, 41 lizards, and 4 turtles, excluding introduced species, have been recorded in the Sky Islands area!
Day 1
Arrive Phoenix

We depart London Heathrow on a direct British Airways flight to Phoenix, Arizona. On arrival we will be met by our guides and together transfer the short distance to a nearby hotel for the night, enjoying our first dinner together and get a good night’s rest before heading into the amazing desert landscapes.

Day 2
White Tank Mountain Region Park

After a hearty American breakfast, this morning we’ll drive West approximately 45 minutes to White Tank Mountain Regional Park, collecting a picnic lunch along the way. Nearly 30,000 acres makes this the largest regional park in Maricopa County. Most of the park is made up of the rugged and beautiful White Tank Mountains on the Valleys west side. The range, deeply serrated with ridges and canyons, rises sharply from its base to peak at over 4,000 feet. Infrequent heavy rains cause flash floodwaters to plunge through the canyons and pour onto the plain. These torrential flows, pouring down chutes and dropping off ledges, have scoured out a series of depressions, or tanks, in the white granite rock below, thus giving the mountains their name.

The park is an area replete with Common Chuckwallas (*Sauromalus ater*), including a tricolor phase with a reddish torso on males, Great Basin Collared Lizards (*Crotaphytus bicinctores*), Southwestern Speckled Rattlesnakes (*Crotalus pyrrhus*) and other delights. There are also Desert [Goode’s] Horned Lizard (*Phrynosoma platyrhinos [goodei]*) , Long-tailed Brush Lizard (*Urosaurus gracious*), Gila Monster (*Heloderma suspectum*), Desert Iguana (*Dipsosaurus dorsalis*), and other wonderful reptile species here.

Other wildlife abounds in White Tank Park. Desert-adapted birds could include Gambel’s Quail, Gila Woodpecker, Gilded Flicker, Curve-billed Thrasher, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher and Costa’s Hummingbird. Mammals in the area include Harris’ Antelope Squirrel, Mule Deer, Coyote, and Desert Cottontail. We’ll look for all these at this regional park throughout the day before heading to our accommodation for the night in Buckeye, a short drive away.

Tonight we stay at a local, comfortable hotel before heading further into the landscapes.

Days 3 and 4
Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument

After breakfast, today we’ll head South and drive 2 hours to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument (OPCNM), which is located in extreme southern Arizona and shares a border with the Mexican state of Sonora. The park is the only place in the United States where the Organ Pipe Cactus grows wild, along with
many other types of cacti and native desert flora. The herpetofauna is rich in the Yuma Desert section of the Sonoran Desert region. Sonoran Desert herpetofauna is strongly dominated by lizard and snake species. In this area, 16 lizard species (12 genera in 4 families) have been recorded, 25 snake species (17 genera in 5 families), and 2 species of turtles (2 genera in 2 families). There are 4 amphibian species, all toads (2 genera in 2 families). These species include a number of true (or obligate) desert species, many desert-included species with broad ecological distributions both in and outside the desert, and 2 riparian species - a garter snake and a mud turtle - that are widespread in mesic Sonoran Desert riparian habitats.

The OPCNM herpetofauna is an incredibly exciting North American representation with several iconic species including the Sonoran Desert Tortoise (Gopherus morafkai), Gila Monster (Heloderma suspectum), Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (Crotalus atrox), and Western Coral Snake (Micruroides euryxanthus). The lizards and snakes are a conspicuous element of the OPCNM experience, both day and night. The species are widely distributed throughout the monument, and many are abundant. The lizards and snakes are so abundant that they form critical elements in the integrated dynamics of OPCNM ecosystems.

There's so many species to find here that we'll explore this area for a day and a half and stay nearby in the town of Ajo for 2 nights. We'll stay at the Sonoran Desert Inn and have dinner at local restaurants. After dinner, equipped with our head-torches, we'll head out in search of the nocturnal quarry of this area, many species will be attracted in by the warm roads.

As well as the herps, we'll keep an eye out for the other special wildlife of this fantastic and unique area. Birds are particularly obvious, and since we're here during the spring migration we'll be on the lookout for migrants such as Ash-throated Flycatcher, Black-headed Grosbeak, up to 10 species of warbler, and the stunning Hooded and Scott’s Orioles. Mammals we could encounter include Black-tailed Jackrabbit, Collared Peccary, Bighorn Sheep, and Round-tailed Ground Squirrel.

Day 5 to 7

Heading back North, we'll relocate to Tucson, approximately 2.5 hours drive. Our first stop after lunch will be at Sweetwater Wetlands, which is a constructed wetland built in 1996. The wetlands are used to help treat secondary effluent and backwash from the reclaimed water treatment system. Sweetwater serves as an environmental education facility and habitat for a wide variety of wildlife. The area consists of several ponds surrounded by cattails, willows, and cottonwoods between which we will search for California & Desert Kingsnakes and freshwater turtles. As the top birding destination in Tucson, birds are particularly abundant in this oasis in the desert. A large variety of waterfowl is possible, including up to 12 species of duck, and we'll be attentive for cormorants, herons, waders, raptors, woodpeckers, and migrants including a large diversity of flycatchers, warblers, tanagers, grosbeaks and sparrows. We could also encounter the resident
Bobcat, Raccoon, and Cotton Rat. After an afternoon exploring the wetlands, we’ll drive to our accommodation, 3 Palms Tucson North, where we’ll stay for 3 nights.

The next day will be a full day at Sabino Canyon after collecting a picnic lunch on the way. Sabino Canyon is a major canyon located in the southern Santa Catalina Mountains and the Coronado National Forest north of Tucson. Sabino Canyon is a popular recreation area, providing a place to walk, hike or ride. Non-herp wildlife in the canyon includes White-tailed Deer, Javelina, skunks and Mountain Lion in typical Sonoran Desert surroundings of Cholla, Prickly Pear Cactus, Agave, Brittlebush, Mesquite, and Palo Verde. We’ll also search for Red-spotted Toad (*Bufo punctatus*), Regal Horned Lizard (*Phrynosoma solare*), Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*), Greater-earless Lizard (*Cophosaurus texanus*), Elegant Earless Lizard (*Holbrookia elegans*), Zebra-tailed Lizard (*Callisaurus draconoides*), and Tiger Rattlesnake (*Crotalus tigris*). Sabino Canyon is a fantastic place to see many desert-adapted birds, and we’ll be on the lookout for the “hard-to-pronounce” Pyrrhuloxia and Phainopepla, the highly local Rufous-winged Sparrow, and the largest wren in the world, the Cactus Wren. There are also Round-tailed Ground Squirrel, which we will look for in this area.

Our second day in the Tucson area will be a full day at Catalina State Park. Another picnic lunch will accompany us. Catalina SP resides on the western slopes of the Santa Catalina Mountains. The park has a number of hiking trails in the high desert slopes and the Saguaro here are tremendous. Among the dense thickets along washes and beautiful, saguaro-studded landscape, we’ll follow to look for Sonoran Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus morafkai*), Sonoran Coral Snake (*Micruroides euryxanthus*) and Whiptail (*Aspidoscelis sp.*) species. Up to four species of hummingbird may delight us in this park in the Catalina foothills, while up to 5 species of wren could be possible! Mammals frequenting this area include Botta’s Pocket Gopher, Antelope Jackrabbit, and Rock Squirrel.

### Days 8 - 10

**Chiricahua Mountains and New Mexico**

This morning we’ll drive 2.5 hours East to Portal, Arizona, a small village close to the Arizona/New Mexico state line, which is nestled in the Chihuahuan desert, an area dominated by Yucca, Agave, Creosote, and Mesquite. Along the way, we’ll explore Stateline Road before lunch in a New Mexico Grille and then head to Cave Creek Ranch area, where we’ll be staying for the next 3 nights. From this base, we will explore numerous sites in the Chiricahua Mountains, which is the largest of the Sky Island mountain ranges. This mountain range supports six basic plant communities, including the only place in the United States to find high-elevation Mexican pine-oak woodlands. The six areas support a unique subset of wildlife. We will spend our two days exploring the multiple trails and roads in this remote corner of Arizona and New Mexico.

Our first day will be spent in the Chiricahua Mountains. Close to Portal is the southwestern research station, where we can search for Desert King Snake (*Lampropeltis splendida*) and Gophersnake (*Pituophis catenifer*). Further along the road is Herb Martyr Dam campground, an area of Madrean juniper and oak woodland, about 1,800 m in the Chiricahua
Mountains. Here we may find multiple Spiny Lizard (*Sceloporus spp.*) species, Madrean Alligator Lizard (*Elgaria kingii*), Sonoran Whiptail (*Coluber bilineatus*), Mojave Rattlesnake (*Crotalus scutulatus*), and mountain king snakes. And further up the same road, but at higher elevation is Barfoot Park. Here we will search for Twin-spotted Rattlesnake (*Crotalus pricei*), Slevin’s Bunchgrass Lizard (*Sceloporus slevini*) and anerytheristic Madrean Alligator Lizard (*Elgaria kingii*). This Portal area is great for night driving, during which we will look for Sonoran Desert Toad (*Incilius alvarius*), Mexican Spadefoot Toads (*Spea multiplicata*), and Couch’s Spadefoot Toad (*Scaphiopus couchii*).

Our second day will be spent across the Stateline for a full day in New Mexico. An hour east across the stateline is Antelope pass New Mexico, which is a spot for Ornate Tree Lizard (*Urosaurus ornatus*), various Whiptail (*Aspidoscelis spp.*) species, Zebra-Tailed Lizard (*Callisaurus draconoides*), Greater Earless Lizard (*Cophosaurus texanus*), Eastern collared lizard (*Crotaphytus collaris*), and Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*). Also, in New Mexico is Granite Gap, an area of Chiricahua desert scrub near the state line. Here we will look for Gophersnakes, more Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*) and Prairie Rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis*), and numerous lizards species. Another night drive around Portal will give us a second chance the nocturnal species.

This Sky Island is one of the most famous in all of Arizona for birds. Several species are found here and nowhere else in the USA, and we could spot Elegant Trogon, Mexican Chickadee, Blue-throated Mountain-Gem, Grace’s Warbler and Buff-breasted Flycatcher. Mammals are abundant here also, and we could see White-nosed Coati, Hooded Skunk, Cliff Chipmunk, Spotted Ground Squirrel, Mexican Fox Squirrel, and White-tailed Deer.

**Day 11**

**Willcox and Mule Shoe Ranch**

On our drive back to Tucson, we will stop at Muleshoe Ranch to search for Arizona Black Rattlesnake (*Crotalus cerberus*), Western Patchnose Snake (*Salvadora hexalepis*), and Great Plains Skink (*Plestiodon obsoletus*). After a diner lunch in Willcox, we’ll drive 2.5 hours to our accommodation, the historic Tanque Verde Ranch in eastern Tucson on the edge of Saguaro National Park East. In the afternoon, we’ll explore the ranch and riparian area for Black-necked Garter Snake (*Thamnophis cyrtopsis*) and other herps in the area. This will be our last night in the Sonoran Desert and we’ll enjoy a delicious dinner in the dining hall at the ranch.

**Day 12**

**Saguaro NP East**

On our last morning we’ll investigate Saguaro NP East. The Rincon Mountain District of Saguaro National Park ranges from an elevation of 2,670 ft to 8,666 ft (813m to 2640m) and contains 6 biotic communities. The biotic communities (starting from the lowest elevation) include desert scrub, desert grassland, oak woodland, pine-oak woodland, pine forest and mixed conifer forest. We’ll explore the lower elevations for Eastern Collared Lizard (*Crotaphytus collaris*), Regal Horned Lizard (*Phrynosoma solare*), Western...
Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*), Tiger Rattlesnake (*Crotalus tigris*), more Greater Earless Lizard (*Cophosaurus texanus*) and Black-necked Garter snake (*Thamnophis cyrtopsis*). Many of the birds, mammals, and butterflies found elsewhere can also be found here, and this gives a great final opportunity to spot any new species.

Finally, we’ll return to our rooms to freshen up, have lunch, and drive 2.5 hours to Phoenix airport for the return flight home.

**Day 13**

We are due to arrive back in London in the early afternoon.

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**Focus**

We’ll focus our time in the field on building an enviable list of reptile and amphibian species seen. Whilst searching for the herpetofauna there is no doubt we’ll come across a huge variety of amazing fauna and flora, but reptiles and amphibians will remain the strong focus of our time in the field.

As the sun begins to warm the stunning landscapes, we’ll start searching from 0900 in the morning through lunch and until 1500 - 1600 in the afternoon when we will stop for a rest and dinner. Most evenings it will be possible to do a night drive in search of nocturnal species, which will be for ~2 hours after dinner.

**Grading**

Grade A/B. We will be in the field most of the day with a break for lunch, either a picnic or a café/diner stop. The tour is comprised mainly of short walks, of easy to moderate level. Some trails will be rocky. Driving time between locations will be an hour or less on most days, but several drives will be up to 3 hours.

**Weather**

April in SE Arizona is temperate, with daytime high temperatures in the high twenties and night-time temperatures in the teens or high single digits °C depending on elevation. Early mornings can be cool. Rain is scarce at this time of year. Skies range will mostly be clear.

**Accommodation**

We stay in comfortable accommodation throughout, including the beautiful Tanque Verde Ranch in Saguaro National Park and the remote Cave Creek Ranch. We will enjoy breakfast at our accommodation each morning and eat dinner at a nearby restaurant in the evening. During the day, we will enjoy a mixture of local restaurants and the occasional picnic.
**Included in the price**

The price includes all accommodation, breakfasts, transfers and transport, airport taxes, and all entrance fees to reserves.

**Extra expenses**

Lunch and dinner, laundry, alcoholic drinks, extra snacks and other personal expenses are not included.

**How to book your place**

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking. If you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact Dan, Dan@naturetrek.co.uk.

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