

## What's up Third Graders?

Yo! So you're coming up to visit the Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve. That's cool. Maybe you'll see me out on the trail. I'm a western fence lizard. Check out my picture. Aren't I a "Cool Dude"?

Look for me hangin' out on the rocks, or chillin' in the bushes. I'll be looking for the little animals like spiders, flies, and crickets that I like to eat. You see I'm a special kind of carnivore. Carnivores are animals that only eat other animals. I'm special because I'm an insectivore. That means I only eat things like insects and spiders. Once I see an animal like a spider, I'm on the move. I'll creep up on it. . . s . . . l . . . o . . . w . . . y . . . and when I'm close enough . . . I'll run and pounce! I can grow to be almost ten inches long. That's almost as long as the ruler in your desk! Then even the biggest insects and spiders I meet are not safe from me.

If you come lookin' for me, your best bet is to visit the chaparral habitat. The plants in the chaparral are mostly tall bushes like chemise, scrub oak, manzanita and holly-leaved red berry. These plants grow close together like trees in a forest. Because these plants don't grow very tall, some people call this habitat the "Elfin Forest." They think it looks like a forest for elves. I like that--the "Elfin Forest." The plants of the chaparral are so tough that they are hard to walk through. That's why animals have made trails. The animal trails here are like tunnels that twist and turn around the tough, tree-like bushes. Make sure you look for them when you visit.

People need trails to get through the chaparral, too. When you go hiking on the Reserve during your field trip, you'll be on people trails. You will start on the Granite Loop Trail. Many of the people trails here follow old animal trails because animals know the best way to get from one place to another. Human workers have used tools to make the trails bigger for people to use. Each year they work hard to keep the trails open and easy to walk on. There are many good trails you can take. So Dude, bring your family back for a visit.

Long ago, cowboys had to ride their horses through the chaparral looking for cattle. They didn't have trails. The tough branches tore their clothes and scratched their legs. Then one day someone had an idea. He made something out of thick leather that could be worn over his pants. He called them chaps. (Get it? chaps--chaparral!) Soon all the cowboys and cowgirls were wearing chaps to protect their legs when they had to ride through chaparral. Humans sure are smart!

Since I am a reptile and cold-blooded, I like to lie in the sun and warm my blood after a cold night. Some call it basking when I do this. I call it chillin'--I'm just hang'n out and heating up! When I am out on my rock, I have to watch out for predators that would like to eat me. The red-shouldered hawk is one. If I'm not watching, that hawk will dive down from the sky and try to catch me. There are other

carnivores like bobcats, long-tailed weasels, and gray foxes that hunt in the chaparral. They can move quietly on the animal trails. They are looking for birds like roadrunners, California quail or other animals, like ME! No worries! When I see any of them, I just run and hide in tiny cracks in the rock. But then there is the black racer! That snake is one fast dude. It is so fast and so thin that it can chase me into those tiny little cracks in the rock and corner me.

Those rocks and boulders you will see me on are really cool! Millions of years ago, when dinosaurs were roaming Earth, they were melted and underground. You heard me right. The rocks that you'll be seeing and touching on your hike used to be melted! They were so hot that they were soft like toothpaste--really hot toothpaste. And they were underground! You know what melted rock underground is called? It's called magma. When magma cools, it cools slowly. As it gets cooler, the melted minerals in the magma make crystals. If you look closely at the rocks along the trail, you can see the crystals that make up the rock. There are at least three different kinds. Rocks with those kinds of crystals are called granite.

Sometimes the melted rock doesn't stay under the ground. Do you know what it is called then? Right, it is called lava. Lava cools faster than magma so it has tiny crystals that are hard to see. There are places on the Plateau where you can find rocks made from cooled lava. These rocks are called basalt.

I love the rocks--I mean, I "dig 'em"--especially after they've been heated by the sun. Aaaaaah! Boy do they feel nice and warm on my belly.

It's pretty dry here in the chaparral. The soil is very sandy, so water doesn't stay around for very long after it rains. It soaks into the ground where plants can get it with their roots, but most animals cannot. So there is not much water here for the birds and animals. Most of them have to go to the riparian or stream wetland habitat to get the water they need. But not me. Uh-uh! I don't need to travel far to get my water. Sometimes I will drink rainwater that stays for a short time in tiny pools on the tops of rocks and boulders. But most of the year it doesn't rain in southern California. That's when I get drops of water called dew that condenses, or forms, on plants from the air at night--especially when it's foggy. So when you see fog at night, think of me drinking drops of dew from the plants the next day.

Dew helps the plants too. Some of these drops get so big that they will drop off the plant's leaves and land on the ground. They soak into the ground, and the plant's roots will take it into the plant. Many plants on the Plateau have leaves that work well to capture moisture in the air and let it to drip to the ground.

In the chaparral habitat the plants have to save every bit of water they get. They get some water from dew drip, but it's not that much, and there isn't much rain in the summer. So, whenever

the plants get some water, they have to hold on to it. That's why the plants here have tough, woody stems and small, waxy leaves. That way, they don't lose much water into the air during the day when they are in the hot sun.

Snakes are one animal that can move easily through the plants in the chaparral. With tough, scaly skin and no legs to get caught in branches, snakes easily slither over the ground and under the bushes. When they find an animal trail, they will sometimes just wait for a small animal like a mouse or a lizard like me to come along. When we go by, the snake will try to attack and eat us.

Yes, I always have to be on the lookout for snakes. That's because I'm not very big. But you don't have to worry about snakes. The ones that are on the Plateau aren't very big, and they're on the ground. When they look up at you, how do you think you look? HUGE! You are scary! Take it from me. When I see you coming, I say, "Uh oh!" and I run and hide. And I'm a tough dude.

Snakes usually slither away when they feel you coming so you hardly ever see them in the wild. But sometimes, as you walk down the trail, you might surprise them before they can get away. If you do, they might freeze. Even I do this sometimes. We wild animals don't want to move because then we'll be easier to see. We try and stay still and blend in. The color of our skin, fur, or feathers helps. Do you know what it's called when something blends in with its surroundings? Right, it's called camouflage (cam-o-flaj). You might walk right by some animals beside the trail and you won't even know it. We are good at hiding because we have to be. There are those carnivores like hawks and badgers that would like to make a meal of us, and to us you look like a carnivore that might eat us. Staying still and blending in is how we survive.

That is why you have to be careful when you are hiking here. If you are not watching and you step on, or very close to a snake that is hiding near the trail, you might get bitten. If it's a rattlesnake, you will get sick. So remember three things that will keep you safe during your visit:

1. Always let the adult docent lead the way. If you stay behind a docent, they'll spot any rattlesnakes on the trail and point it out to you. (You'll be lucky to see one because they like to hide.)
2. Always watch where you put your hands and feet. Don't put them in places like cracks in the rocks where you can't see. Animals like snakes or black widow spiders might be hangin' out in there.
3. Remember, never touch a snake even if you think you know what kind it is. Only five people have ever been bitten by rattlesnakes on the Reserve in over twenty years. Don't be number six.

When you come up to the Reserve to visit, you will have to be very quiet to get a chance to see me. Remember to look for me on the granite rocks or listen for me moving in the leaves under a bush. I'm a show-off. If there is another lizard around, you might see me doing my push-ups--well, they look like push-ups.

I am protecting my home. The area around the rocks where I live has just enough food and shelter for me and a friend or two. There are other lizards around that would like to move in on my home-- whiptail lizards, alligator lizards, horned lizards, granite spiny lizards and even other western fence lizards. If another lizard comes by, I will do my push-ups to scare him or her away. Push-ups make me look bigger and scarier, and it shows off my healthy, blue belly and throat.

Well, I hope your trip up here is a good one. Be lookin' for me. As long as there are rocks for me to hide around, I'll be there.

Later.

## A Western Fence Lizard

