

Madera Canyon Species Spotlight:

Desert Grassland Whiptail and Sonoran Spotted Whiptail Lizards

Around Proctor in late morning several times recently, I was somewhat surprised to see the whiptail lizards were out! Summer 2020 has been “scalding” hot with scanty precipitation in the canyon- not ideal conditions for canyon plants or animals. None-the-less, these slim, agile pin-striped lizards were skittering up the paved path ahead as usual, before finally dashing headlong off into trailside vegetation.

Foraging naturally for ants and other arthropods, whiptails move with a hesitant, jerky “mechanical-ness” that somewhat reminds me of the robotic break-dancers on TV. But when disturbed, they can generate surprising speed from their short limbs, sometimes even tucking their front feet up off the ground and propelling themselves solely by furiously churning hind legs.

Whiptails often display a curious behavior. They will scamper along the trail ahead of a hiker for surprising distances, as if reluctant to yield the path. “Social distancing” is rigorously maintained by short bursts of speed between many stops and starts. Eventually they seem to tire of the game and finally turn off into vegetation and safety. It can not only be very quirkily amusing “helping a lizard get exercise”, but often provides an excellent opportunity to observe these quick, nervous reptiles fairly closely.

Two species of whiptail lizards are commonly seen in Madera Canyon, the Desert Grassland Whiptail and the Sonoran Spotted Whiptail. In warm weather, they are often the most common lizards seen on the ground along the trail. The species are remarkably similar in size, description and living habits; also, their preferred habitats overlap. It is often recommended to use binoculars or telephoto lens for a close look to distinguish the two species apart.

Desert Grassland Whiptails, *Aspidoscelis uniparens*, are long, thin lizards to about 6.5” in length. They are dark brown in color with a long muted blue to olive tail and six light cream stripes running down neck and back. There are no light spots between the stripes! Diurnal lizards, Desert Grassland Whiptails are most active in the morning and late afternoon. They prefer valleys and slopes, often with mesquite and yucca, within semi-desert grassland- like the bajada around Proctor, and other grassland habitats. The species can also range into some open woodland habitats- interior chaparral and oak/juniper woodlands in the canyon. Desert Grassland Whiptails eat ants, termites and other small invertebrates.

Sonoran Spotted Whiptails, *Aspidoscelis sonorae*, are also long, thin lizards to about 6.3” in length, including tail. They are brown to black in color with a long brown to olive-brown tail and six yellow to cream stripes running along their neck and back. There are a few light spots sprinkled between the stripes, though the spots often fade in older individuals and may be hard to see from a distance. Found primarily in oak woodland and oak grasslands, the species can range up into pine/oak woodlands at higher elevations. Sonoran Spotted Whiptails generally prefer hillsides and canyons; they can be

particularly abundant along riparian corridors- like Madera Creek. Also diurnal lizards, they are most active in the morning and late afternoon foraging on the ground for ants, termites and other small invertebrates.

Perhaps the most interesting fact about these two whiptail species is that they are all FEMALE! There are no males! Both species are parthenogenic- all-female lineages that produce fertile eggs asexually that hatch into clones of the mother!

Two other whiptail species are found close to the canyon. Tiger Whiptails, *Aspidoscelis tigris*, with dark mottling rather than stripes, ranges from the low Santa Cruz Valley up into the lower bajada below Madera Canyon and with both males and females, reproduce sexually. Canyon Spotted Whiptails, *Aspidoscelis burti*, a lizard with a small adult striped form and a large adult spotted form, are occasionally seen along the Madera Creek corridor, primarily well below Proctor. This species also has males and females that reproduce sexually.



Desert Grassland Whiptail



Sonoran Spotted Whiptail