

Window Herping in Tucson

By

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When people ask me why I moved to Tucson, my reply is not work, family or weather. Herps is why I came. For a decade I frequently passed through Tucson and surrounding areas. I would almost always stop for a day or two to catch lizards and cruise for snakes. When a two-year job opportunity became available at just the right time, the decision was made with few other considerations. Fortunately, I found Tucson to be a great place to live in all respects. I've been here fourteen years.

A few months ago, in June, I was sitting at the computer and gazing out the window at a Zebra-Tailed Lizard (*Callisaurus draconoides*). This colorful, difficult to approach, lizard has yellow, blue and black markings on its sides and a black striped tail. He was sitting on a wall about ten feet away. The tail was being jerkily whipped back and fourth. In a blazing dash of about three feet the lizard suddenly had a small moth in its mouth. After watching this brief display of life in the food chain, I thought about the variety of herps I've seen over the years just through the windows of my own house. The number of species was fifteen. Eight lizards, two snakes, two turtles, a tortoise, a toad, and a frog.

This is more herps than many states have! If I lived in any other town I wouldn't be able to write this, but lets go window herping. My house sits at an

altitude of 3001 feet above sea level, on one and a half acres of lush Sonoran desert, in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains. These mountains form the northern boarder of Tucson and are capped by pine forests at over ten thousand feet. My office window, where I was watching the Zebra-Tailed Lizard, faces northeast. Through this window, a few years ago, I saw a big black streak dart into the concrete block, plywood and dirt tortoise den I built for our pet Sonoran Desert Tortoises, Boris and Peaty. I dashed outside, grabbing a pair of leather gloves on the way. What I found in the tortoise den was just about the meanest snake I've ever encountered. The six-foot long, one and a half-inch in diameter dirty black snake I was holding in both hands was surprisingly strong. The only reason I wasn't bleeding was the four-inch juvenile Desert Tortoise, Peaty, firmly clenched in its mouth. It was not easy to pry open the snakes mouth and perform the extraction. Saving the little guy was accomplished without bloodshed. The monster of course was a Black Coachwhip (*Masticophis flagellum*). The impressiveness of seeing and holding a Coachwhip, one of the largest American snakes, is hard to describe. Unless you are very fond of the color red they are best left unmolested.

Moving around the house in a clockwise fashion. The breakfast room and kitchen have four windows that look out on to the back patio and yard. Looking through these southeast facing panes I frequently see Desert Spiny Lizards (*Sceloporus magister*) basking in the early morning sun. These are the most common herps I see in the area. Some of the big males look to be a foot long and are so used to me watching them that they don't flee when I'm close by.

The most unusual site through this southeast window occurred about two years ago while I was on the phone to my sister in New York. I remember the words well, “Lisa I’ll call you back, there’s a Gila Monster (*Heloderma suspectum*) climbing our pine tree in the yard”. The Gila Monster is the largest American lizard. Though I’ve seen them on top of a concrete wall, the site of the stocky orange and black lizard climbing a tree felt out of place. I checked the small pine for a bird nest or anything else that might attract the attention of this beautiful lizard. I found nothing. How should I know what would attract a Gila Monsters fancy. My son and wife saw another Gila Monster out the northwest window of his room just this year. I missed it.

Moving southwest into the den, a sliding glass door opens out on to a small cement patio bordered by my wife’s herb garden. Western Whiptails (*Cnemidophorus tigris*) make their daily pass through the herb garden. With their characteristic stop and go hunting technique, they do an unfortunately poor job of keeping down the bug population. Through the same door the small pond I built for herps, not fish, contains both Western Painted Turtles (*Chrysemys picta belli*) and Red-Eared Sliders (*Pseudemys scripta elegans*). In season I see the turtles basking on a daily basis. Even though these turtles are introduced into the environment I’ve counted them anyway because I’m the one doing the counting. Bullfrogs (*Rana catesbeiana*) are also residents of the pond. My family and I see them jumping into the water with any disturbance. They were also introduced when one year I put in a few bullfrog tadpoles along with the goldfish I put in for the turtles.

At times, during the summer monsoon season, Colorado River Toads (*Bufo alvarius*) are so abundant we see them out of every window at once. One morning in August, while peering through my southeast bedroom sliding glass door, the swimming pool looked strange. A black coating seemed to have covered the bottom and sides. Once I put on my glasses the picture resolved into about a million tadpoles. I assumed that these were Colorado River Toad tadpoles, but I'm not sure. What to do with a million tadpoles in your pool is another story.

Through the same bedroom window, a few months ago, I spotted a four-foot Sonoran Gopher Snake (*Pituophis melanoleucus affinis*) slowly crawling across the patio. I was on the phone at the time. Without even getting off the phone I walked outside and picked up the snake and handled it, letting the wild serpent crawl through my hands. That's how gentle the Tucson population of Gopher Snakes is.

Another all window herp is the Tucson Banded Gecko (*Coleonyx variegatus bogerti*). This yellow and brown banded gecko dominates the night scene. Wherever there is a light outside a window at night I'll occasionally see one. They're usually on the ground but occasionally on the walls in wait of bugs. Once our cat got hold of one in the house and testifying to the Gecko's tendency to be vocal, I'm not sure which was louder the cat's meows or the Gecko's squeaks.

Continuing the clockwise progression, the west side of the house is windowless. Darn, who knows what I'm missing? My kid's bedroom windows face

northwest. They have been some of the most productive herping portals. My son often sits on his bunk bed gazing out at the quail, rabbits, and roadrunners that frequent the front yard. He'll come running to get me if he sees a herp. In addition to the Gila Monster mentioned earlier, I've been treated to a view, on several occasions, of a Regal Horned Lizard (*Phrynosoma solare*) gobbling up ants as fast as a vacuum cleaner.

A Mesquite tree in the front yard is only a few feet from my daughter's window. It takes awhile due to their cryptic brown and black coloration, but a Tree Lizard (*Urosaurus ornatus*) can usually be spotted on the tree. In a small rock pile, under this Mesquite, I've spotted Lesser Earless Lizards (*Holbrookia maculata*) jumping from rock to rock. These little lizards can be very colorful during the breeding season. They are one of the easiest lizards to catch with a noose or even by hand. You can frequently walk right up to one and it will just look at you. When they do scamper away, it's usually just a few feet.

There you have it -- fifteen herps through nine windows. Other herps I've seen within a few hundred feet of my house include the Long-Nosed Snake (*Rhinocheilus lecontei*), the Desert Patch-Nosed Snake (*Salvadora hexalepis hexalepis*), the Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*), the common collared Lizard (*Crotaphytus collaris*), and the Side Blotched Lizard (*Uta stansburiana*). If you can see this many herps through the windows of a Tucson house, just Imagine what you could see if you go outside.