

FIELD OBSERVATION REPORT

By Mary Wilson

November 2018

While driving to do research at the Poppy Reserve on October 18th I had to stop because of a horse. It was strolling down Lancaster Road just past 110th St. West. The car and truck ahead of me stopped until they could get around it. Then the horse came right to my car and stopped in front with its head over the hood (that is when I snapped the photo). He was very thin and when he looked at me it was like he was asking for my help. He finally moved on and I was wondering who I should call. Later that evening I was talking with friends who are involved with horses and they solved the puzzle. The SPCA came and picked him up—now at least someone will look after him.



Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve

Spotted a coyote crossing the road at Avenue K and 80th St. West. The rubber rabbitbrush is starting to bloom. Ragweed has the male and female blooms. The long stemmed buckwheat has clusters of flowers that are turning the pink color.

Arthur B. Ripley Desert Woodland State Park

Next time you go to Ripley check out the Rare Juniper Trail—there are two new benches at Post #1 and #4. It is so nice to just sit and listen to nature or sometimes just the sound of silence.



Post #1

Post #4

Gopher Snake – *Pituophis melanoleucus*



The gopher snake's body is mostly yellow or tan. The top of the body is covered with reddish or brown triangular spots or blotches on its back. This is why it is often mistaken as a venomous rattlesnake. The underside of the snake is generally yellow and has large black spots that reach out toward the sides. They typically reach lengths of 3 to 8 feet. They have relatively large eyes, have relatively large and distinct heads with narrow necks. They often have two dark lines on their faces that go from the top of their head around either side of their eyes. Like the majority of nonvenomous snakes in the United States, gopher snakes have rounded pupils and not vertical, cat-like pupils of rattlesnakes.



The gopher snake is found along the coast of western North America down to Central Mexico. The snake adapts easily and lives in areas where there are rodents and small animals for food. They live in such areas as plains, deserts, grasslands, swamps and agricultural areas like wheat or corn fields.

In winter, gopher snakes hibernate, retreating to communal dens, sometimes sharing the lair with other snakes. In the breeding season, males vigorously defend their territories against all competing males. They will eat rats, mice, moles, other small mammals and bird's eggs. The non-venomous gopher snake is commonly misidentified as a rattlesnake because of its superficially similar coloration and its defensive behavior when feeling threatened. A scared gopher snake will coil, flatten its head, hiss, and shake its tail rapidly, doing a very convincing rattlesnake imitation. I have personally witnessed this and it is very impressive—it scared me until I could identify it and calm down to observe it.

Mainly diurnal, these cold-blooded snakes often change their activity patterns to become nocturnal during the intense heat of desert summers. They may be observed sunning on the rocks or drawing heat from the pavement during the day to ready themselves for active nights. Gopher snakes often sun themselves on roads, which puts them at risk for being run over by vehicles.

Gopher snakes mate during July and August. It is the only time of year they socialize. Females emit a chemical through their skin that draws males to them and stimulates mating behaviors. Males will mate with as many females as they can each year. Six weeks after mating, females lay a clutch of eggs with 2 to 24 eggs each. Hatchlings emerge fully developed within 10 weeks, and are large enough to eat small mice. Females sometimes lay two batches (called clutches) of eggs per season. Eggs incubate in nests, which are sometimes communal with other gopher snakes. Gopher snakes have no parental involvement after laying eggs.

Though predators themselves, non-venomous gopher snakes may become prey to red-tailed hawks, kit foxes or coyotes.

This nonvenomous snake helps control the rodent population in many areas and farmers find the snake most helpful in preventing crop destruction by small mammals such as gophers. Gopher snakes population is relatively stable. They are listed as “Least Concern” on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List, and they are not on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Endangered Species List.

The motion cameras at the Poppy Reserve will get photos of more than the burrowing owls. Imagine my surprise when I got the photos from September 22, 2018 and spotted goats going across the habitats. There is definitely a broken fence somewhere. Fortunately they didn't do a lot of damage to the habitat entrances.



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While changing the batteries and cartridges in the motion camera something caught my eye and doing a slow trot a kit fox was approaching me. I stopped and said, "Well hello!" and she stopped and cocked her head listening to me. She circled me at a distance and then trotted off.



M. Wilson



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I went on to another habitat and she was back. This time she was very curious as to what I was doing. She circled me a couple of times at a distance and then it got the best of her and she came to the southwest facing entrance and stuck her head in to smell it. She was about six feet away from me. After she smelled the entrance she trotted off, circled me at a distance and then headed north. She never showed her teeth, growled, barked or any other threatening moves but seemed to enjoy my talking to her and telling her how pretty she was and that I would be leaving "her" territory very soon. She didn't even mind my taking photos of her.



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BURROWING OWLS

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The owlets are starting to feed themselves. The owlet above left has caught a grasshopper. He carries it in front of a sibling and is probably wondering what to do with it.



Now it figures out what to do—tilt head up and let it go down—success!