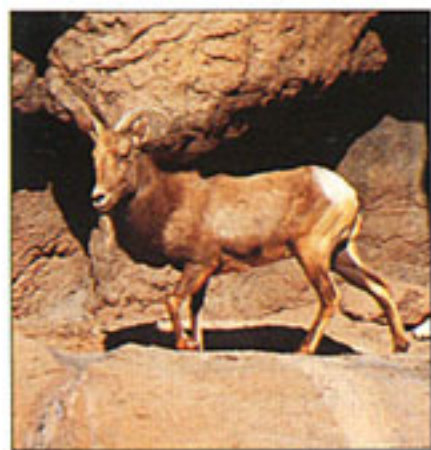


Desert Flora and Fauna

DESPITE THE fact that around 70 percent of the Southwest region is occupied by desert, it is not an arid, lifeless wasteland. There are four distinct deserts: the Sonoran, the Chihuahuan, the Great Basin, and the Mojave. The Sonoran Desert has one of the richest arrays of flora and fauna in the country. The Chihuahuan Desert supports hardy yuccas and agaves, and its hills and plains are covered with a dry, wheat-colored grass. The Great Basin is a cooler desert and home to a variety of grasses and desert animals. Spring rains and run-off from the mountains can transform even the driest deserts. At such times some 250 species of flower bloom in the Mojave.

All living things in these southwestern desert regions adapt remarkably well to their harsh environment; the plants in particular are capable of storing water when it is available and using it sparingly during dry periods.



Bighorn sheep are shy, elusive creatures and are not easily spotted. Now a protected species, they are being gradually reintroduced throughout the desert areas.



THE SONORAN

Found in southern Arizona, the Sonoran's summer "monsoons" and winter storms make it the greenest of the deserts. It is famous for the tall saguaro cactus (see p86), some of which attain heights of 50 ft (15 m) and provide a home for such desert animals as the Gila woodpecker and the elf owl.



THE CHIHUAHUAN

Mainly found in Mexico, the Chihuahuan also reaches north to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and into parts of southeastern Arizona. Cacti, agaves, and yuccas, and lizards, rattlesnakes, and coyotes survive in conditions that include snowfall in winter and high temperatures and thunderstorms in summer.



The javelina is a strange piglike mammal that wanders the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts in small packs.

Yucca plants

have been gathered for centuries and have many uses: their fruit can be eaten, and the roots make shampoo.



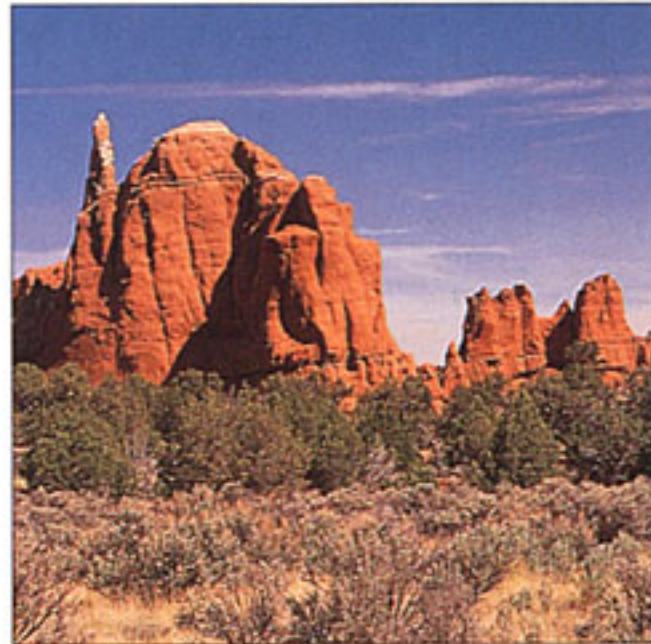
DANGERS IN THE DESERT

The danger of poisonous desert creatures has often been exaggerated. Although some desert creatures do, on rare occasions, bite or sting people, the bites are seldom fatal unless the victims are small children or have serious health problems. To avoid being hurt, never reach into dark spaces or up onto overhead ledges where you can't see. Watch where you place your feet, and shake out clothes and shoes before putting them on. Never harass or handle a poisonous creature. If you are bitten, stay calm and seek medical help immediately.

The desert scorpion is golden in color. Its bite is venomous so anyone who has been bitten should go to a hospital for an antidote.



The Gila monster is the only venomous lizard in the US. It is a slow-moving but rarely seen inhabitant of the desert regions, and will only bite if it feels threatened.



THE GREAT BASIN

With its canyons, cliffs, mesas, and buttes, the landscape of the Great Basin Desert appears most characteristic of the region. It extends from the far northwest corner of Arizona into eastern Utah and Oregon, and its scattering of cacti, sage, and mesquite is home to the bighorn sheep and various types of rattlesnake.



Sagebrush is a pervasive subshrub that covers vast areas of the cooler Great Basin Desert. It smells of sage.

Golden eagles can be seen high in the sky in daytime as they hunt for prey across the Great Basin Desert.



THE MOJAVE

This vast desert extends into central and northern Arizona. The Mojave is dry for most of the year, but a small amount of winter rain results in a display of wildflowers in spring. Other flora and fauna found here include creosote bush, cacti, yucca, jackrabbits, desert tortoises, and bighorn sheep.

The blacktailed jackrabbit is born with a full coat of muted fur to camouflage it from predators such as the coyote.



The Joshua tree was named by Mormons who pictured the up-raised arms of Joshua in its branches.



The desert tortoise can live for more than 50 years. It is now a protected species and is increasingly difficult to spot.

Prickly pear cacti

flower in spring and are among the largest of the many types of cacti that flourish in the Sonoran Desert.

