

## The Desert Biome

Plants and animals live on every continent. A community of plants and animals is called a biome (buy-ome). The United States has many biomes. They include forests, plains, and oceans.

One of these natural neighborhoods is the hot, dry desert. There are three hot deserts in the United States. They are the Mojave, the Sonoran, and the Chihuahuan. Rain seldom falls in these seemingly empty lands. Daytime temperatures often exceed 100 degrees.

Plants that live in hot deserts have to use water well. Some plants store water in their roots and stems. The prickly pear cactus is a good example. Its stem is broad and flat. When it rains, the stem plumps up with water. The ocotillo cactus adapts in a different way. Its tiny leaves keep water from evaporating.

Desert plants have to protect themselves. They use a lot of their energy to survive and grow. Most do not grow as quickly as plants in wetter, milder places. They also often have sharp spines or barbs to keep animals from eating them. Hot desert plants include yuccas, ocotillos, and prickly pears.

Desert animals include insects, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals. Tortoises, snakes, and lizards are reptiles that thrive in the desert heat. Some kinds of toads can hatch in puddles after summer rains and change from tadpoles to toads before the water even evaporates. Vultures, golden eagles, owls, roadrunners, and quail are all birds that make their homes in the desert. Desert mammals include rabbits, coyotes, kangaroo rats, and bats.

Like animals in other biomes, all desert creatures belong to food chains. Some are herbivores, and others are carnivores. Desert plant-eaters include tortoises, jackrabbits, and mice. Desert meat-eaters include king snakes, coyotes, and red-tailed hawks. Some desert creatures will eat either plants or animals. These omnivores include mourning doves and gray foxes.

The desert biome is a neighborhood of plants and animals. They have all adapted to a place that seems very unwelcoming. They have learned to thrive where many other plants and animals could not survive. For them, this hot, dry place is home.

