

China Camp's Tiny Dragons

Text and Photo: Harriot Manley



Sit still on a warm summer afternoon at China Camp, and you'll likely find yourself in the middle of a miniature battlefield straight out of Game of Thrones, with pint-size dragons skittering across the dusty earth and stone.

Behold the Western fence lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis*), looking every bit as fierce (albeit on a Lilliputian scale) as giant dragons. While looking like mini-

dragons might be cool enough, Western fence lizards have a host of intriguing behaviors and body features.

Herewith, five fascinating facts about Western fence lizards:

- 1. They do push-ups to communicate.** While a fence lizard's back is tan to black (see #2 for more on that), its underbelly and throat are creamy white and streaked with bands of turquoise blue, earning it the nickname "blue belly." Highly territorial male fence lizards, which have especially flashy blue bands, often do quick sets of pushups to show off their colors to ward off other males and impress females.
- 2. They change color like chameleons.** To better blend into their surroundings and avoid becoming prey, Western fence lizards can change from pale tan to almost black. These cold-blooded reptiles also turn darker on cold days to soak up more solar heat.
- 3. They help stop the spread of Lyme disease.** Researchers have discovered that when pinhead-size tick nymphs (the ones that carry Lyme disease bacteria) feed on Western fence lizards, the bacteria die. Tick nymphs often feed on fence lizards, which may explain why human incidents of Lyme disease are lower in areas with lots of blue-bellies.
- 4. In a pinch, they can lose their tails.** If a kestrel, snake, or other predator attacks a blue-belly, it has a secret weapon: The lizard can make its tail fall off. The lopped-off tail still wiggles, and hopefully catches the eye of the predator long enough to let the *rest* of the lizard make a speedy getaway. It takes a lot of energy to grow back a tail, but for the lizard, that's better than becoming lunch.

- 5. They come from a very big family.** The Western fence lizard is one of some 130 species of Phrynosomatidae lizards spread from Canada to Panama, living in a wide array of habitats, including deserts, prairies, and even cloud forests.