

**APPARENT ACCIDENTAL DEATH:
CHUCKWALLA MEETS AGAVE**

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August 16, 1991: I was hiking in a remote portion of the Gila Mountains, about 4.5 km south of Telegraph Pass/Interstate 8, and about 30 km ESE of Yuma, when I encountered a relatively freshly killed adult male chuckwalla (*Sauromalus obesus = ater*) impaled on an *Agave deserti* (Fig. 1).

How could this have happened? When I see a lizard impaled on something, I think of loggerhead shrikes. Grismer (2002) found the remains of a 90 mm juvenile spiny chuckwalla (*Sauromalus hispidus*) impaled on a shrub by a shrike, but even the boldest of shrikes would not take on an adult chuckwalla. I found this lizard in an area that receives very little human visitation (especially in August), so I ruled out vandalism.

Assuming something did not purposely impale this chuckwalla, then it must have fallen onto the agave. Grismer (2002) found a freshly killed Isla San Esteban chuckwalla (*Sauromalus varius*) that had been dropped by a red-tailed hawk. So maybe the chuckwalla was dropped by a raptor and fell on the agave, although that seems unlikely. If it was dropped by a raptor, I would expect to see puncture wounds from talons or a beak, of which there was none.

With these and other causation thoughts in mind, I did a bit of detective work to ferret out what may have happened.

Above the agave was a rock outcrop with a very nice crevice in it. On top of the outcrop were numerous chuckwalla scat; clear evidence that this was both a basking place and a refuge against predators and the elements. So perhaps the lizard fell from the outcrop onto the agave. In the Mojave Desert of California, Johnson (1965) observed chuckwallas “jumping several feet from rock to rock, although not always successfully”. Johnson went on to say that chuckwallas will climb into shrubs to forage, and “sometimes a chuckwalla fell while climbing around on a bush, apparently without harm.” So maybe our chuckwalla made a flying leap and missed, or fell from an overhanging shrub or tree (but this time with apparent harm).

Alternatively, perhaps it was chased off the outcrop. Grismer (2002) observed 2 adult spiny chuckwallas that ran for cover when ravens flew over. Male chuckwallas also chase or get chased by other males (Johnson 1965, Nagy 1973, Berry 1974, but see Kwiatkowski and Sullivan 2002). So maybe during one of these intra- or inter-specific encounters our chuckwalla made an unfortunate and fatal misstep, and fell from the outcrop.

We will never know what really happened. But the most likely explanation is that this animal met its fate by way of an accidental fall or misstep, with grisly results. The longer you live, the greater the chance that an improbable accident will take you out. Chuckwallas are long-lived; big adults may be 25 years or more of age (Johnson 1965, Nagy 1973). So as awful as this looks, such



Fig. 1: Adult male chuckwalla impaled on *Agave deserti*, Gila Mountains near Yuma, Arizona.

fatal accidents are probably more common for chuckwallas than for other lizards.

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