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Title

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Journal

The Journal of California Anthropology, 5(1)

Author

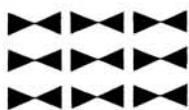
Wallace, William J

Publication Date

1978-07-01

Peer reviewed

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The Chuckwalla: A Death Valley Indian Food

WILLIAM J. WALLACE

A favored though probably infrequent fare of the Death Valley Indians was the flesh of the chuckwalla (*Sauromalus obesus*), California's largest lizard (Fig. 1). The capture of one of these creatures provided a good-sized meal, for a full-grown individual can attain a length of eighteen inches and a weight of two or three pounds. The big lizard's meat is sweet and delicate, presumably because it is a thorough-going vegetarian, feeding on fresh, moisture-rich flowers, fruits, buds, and leaves of a variety of desert plants. One early visitor

likened it to "that of a frog's hind legs" (Spears 1892:79).

Since they are rock-dwellers, chuckwallas are rarely seen on the floor of Death Valley. They live mostly on the boulder-strewn alluvial fans that fringe the valley, but also range up into the rocky canyons and washes of the lower mountains to elevations of 5000 feet (Turner and Wauer 1963:124). At night, they retreat into deep rock crevices, slowly crawling out in the morning to warm themselves in the sun before beginning the day's foraging.

It was in the early morning, just after the big lizards emerged from the rocks and were still sluggish, that the Indians hunted them (Steward 1941:331). Catching them was a task of the women, small parties of whom, accompanied and assisted by children, diligently searched localities known to abound in chuckwallas. No doubt hunts were more frequent in the spring when the objects of the chase were fat and plentiful and their flesh most needed to augment fast-dwindling food supplies. When the spring opens, the creatures are too lean and gaunt from a winter's hibernation to provide much meat. But, being greedy eaters, they soon fatten themselves on fresh plant growth.

Often too, chuckwallas were captured incidentally. For instance, if a woman spotted one while out scouring the countryside for plant foods, she made every effort to add it to the family larder. The same applied, of course, to a man or boy hunting rabbits or other game.

Very little is known about native methods of taking chuckwallas. It seems quite likely that hunters sneaked up on individuals basking or feeding in the open and seized or clubbed them. Sometimes, they must have been chased and caught by hand. This would not have been an easy task because, though heavy-bodied and awkward looking, the creatures are clever at dodging and can run at surprising speed when pressed. Moreover, if grabbed, the chuckwalla defends itself by lashing its strong,

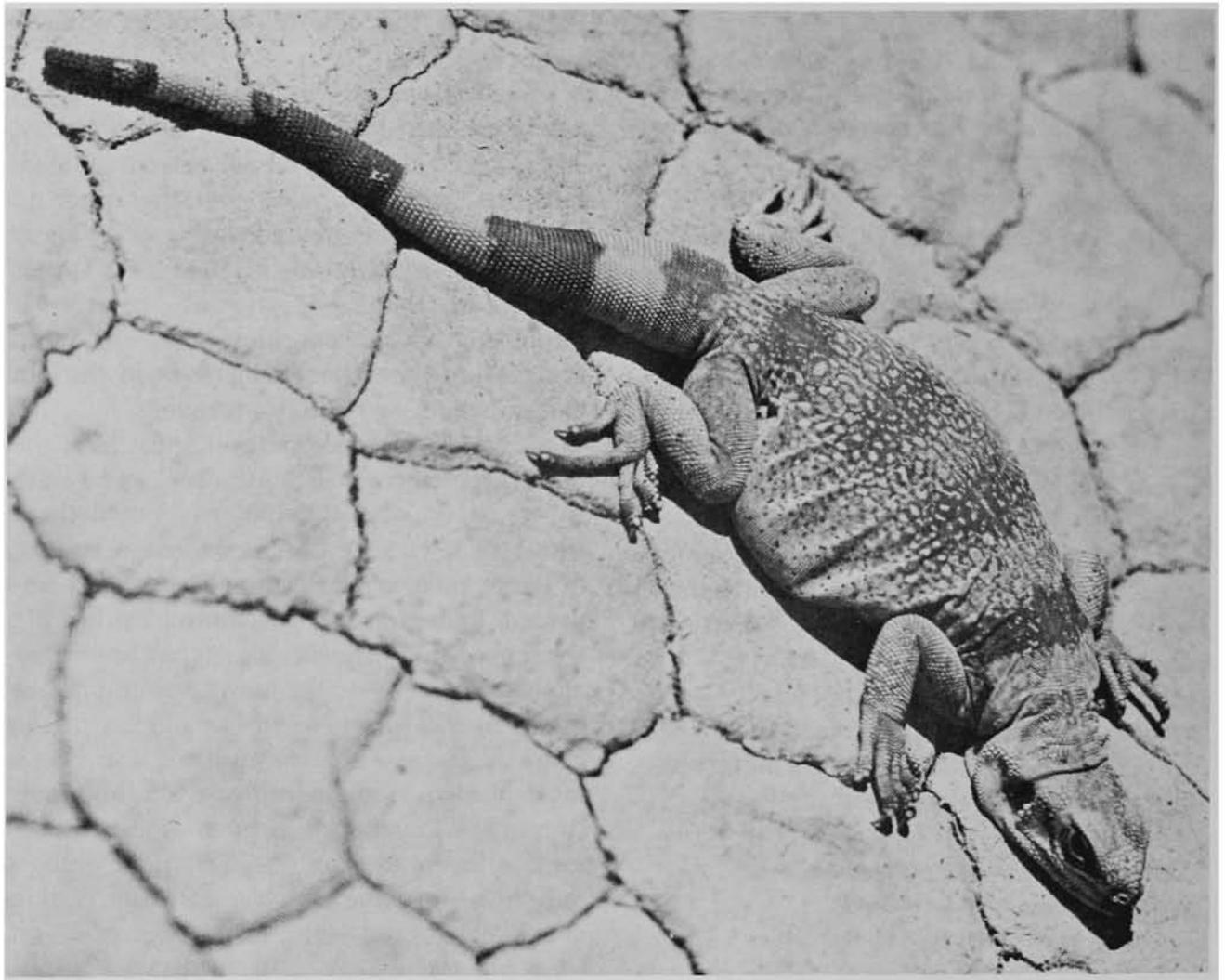


Fig. 1. Young chuckwalla (*Sauromalus obesus*). W. H. Alexander photo.

heavy tail or by resorting to biting—and the teeth of a full-grown adult can inflict a nasty and painful wound! Conceivably, nooses of the sort used for taking other species of big lizards among the mesquite-covered sand dunes of the valley floor (Grinnell 1937:124) were occasionally employed. However, these could hardly have been effective on the more open ground of the alluvial fans.

If a pursued chuckwalla succeeded in darting into a rock cranny, it expanded its body by gulping in air so as to become tightly fixed in place. To extract the wedged-in lizard, the hunter thrust a bone-barbed hook into its hiding place and punctured its lungs. Once

deflated, no difficulty was encountered in drawing the animal out.¹

The hook used in this operation was a specialized instrument, known only to the Death Valley Indians and a few of their immediate neighbors (Steward 1941:275). Probably typical is the specimen (Fig. 2, left) recovered from a tiny rockshelter in the Ubehebe Craters district, where for many years it had lain hidden away beneath three twined baskets (Wallace 1968:19-21). The hook's handle consists of a slender hardwood rod, 73.5 cm. long and 7-9 mm. in diameter. The barb, fashioned from a 4.5 cm. long piece of mammal bone, is sharply pointed at one end

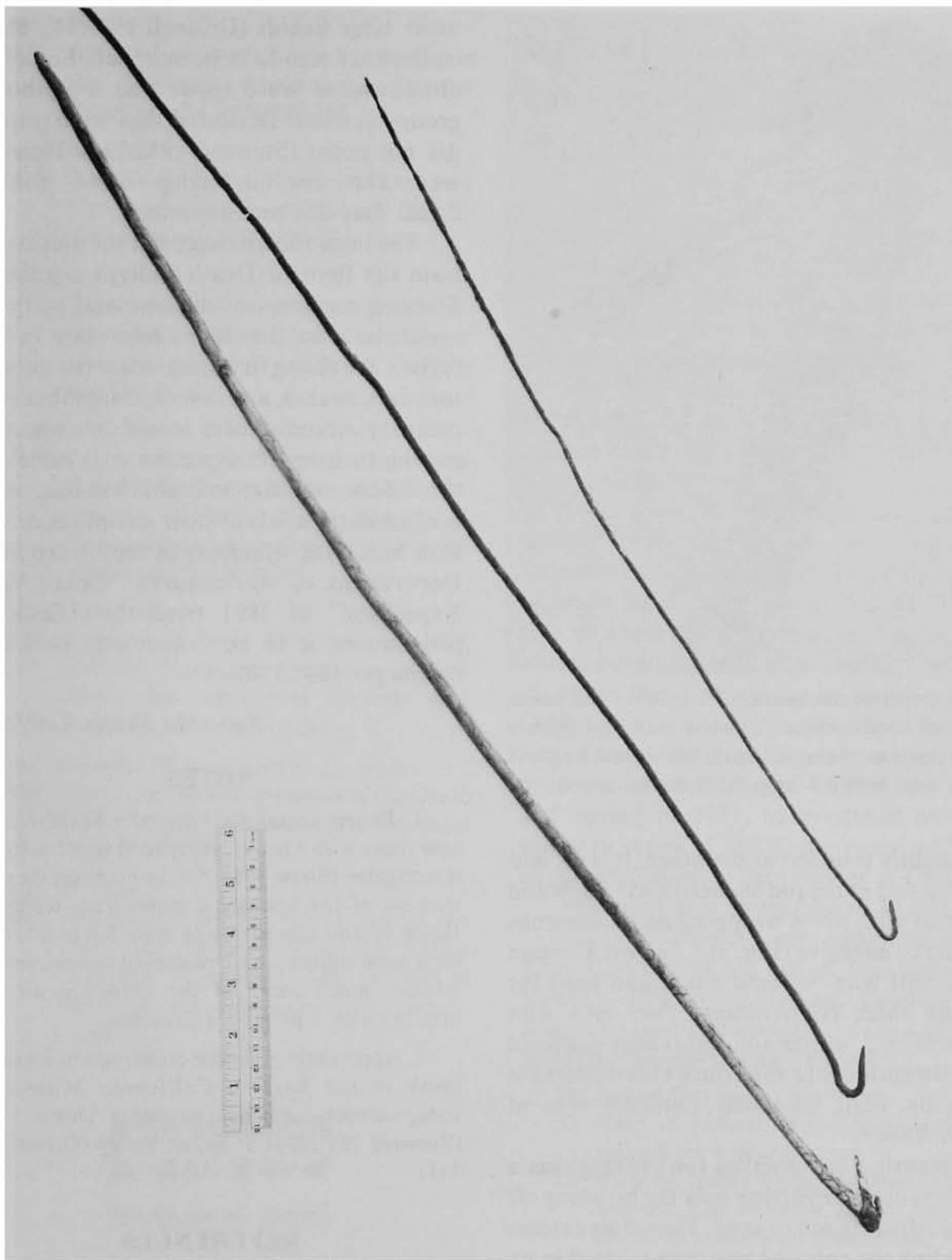


Fig. 2. Chuckwalla hooks. Left specimen of hardwood with bone barb, recovered from a small rockshelter in the Ubehebe Craters district, Death Valley. Center and right specimens of heavy gauge wire, and thus dating to the historic period, found at an encampment among sand dunes at Mesquite Flat, Death Valley. Edith Wallace photo.



Fig. 3. Detail of chuckwalla hook showing attachment of hook barb to hardwood shaft. Specimen is same as shown in Fig. 2, left. Actual length of bone barb is 4.5 cm. Edith Wallace photo.

and slightly rounded at the other. It is set into the split end of the rod at about a 45° angle and held fast with sinew wrapping and a generous coating of adhesive (Fig. 3).² In post-Contact times, stiff wire replaced wood and bone for making these contrivances. Two such wire hooks (Fig. 2, center and right) were collected from the surface of a sand dune encampment at Mesquite Flat, the great northern arm of Death Valley.

Preparing chuckwallas for cooking was a simple process, involving only the brushing off of any adhering soil or sand. The whole carcass (including the entrails) was then roasted in an earth oven (Steward 1941:338). A journalist who visited Death Valley in 1891 reported that "the Indians placed them as caught between two hot rocks to roast" (Spears 1892:78). Like

other large lizards (Grinnell 1937:34), chuckwallas may also have been boiled. Sometimes chuckwallas were traded to neighboring groups in whose territories they were scarce or did not occur (Steward 1941:331). How they were kept for bartering—alive, cooked, dried—has not been reported.

The local Indians were not the only ones to taste the flesh of Death Valley's big lizards. Starving members of the overland party that wandered into the desert basin late in 1849 turned to eating it along with the meat of tortoises, snakes, and ravens, things that under ordinary circumstances would have been revolting to them. Prospectors who came after the '49ers ate dressed chuckwallas, either broiled in the coals of their campfires or fried with bacon fat. Members of the United States Department of Agriculture's "Death Valley Expedition" of 1891 tried their flesh and pronounced it to be "sweet and palatable" (Stejneger 1893:174).

Redondo Beach, California

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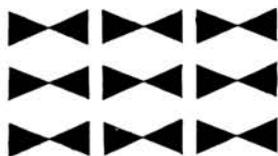
1. Experimental stabbing of a lizard eight or nine times with a heavy, sharpened wire has led one investigator (Shaw 1945:299) to question the effectiveness of the aboriginal puncturing technique. However, this can hardly be regarded as a fair test for a hook inflicts a gash or gaping wound, one that releases much more of the gulped-in air than piercing with a pointed instrument.

2. Apparently of similar construction is a reptile hook in the Eastern California Museum at Independence, obtained in either Death Valley (Steward 1941:224) or Saline Valley (Driver 1937:111).

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Robert H. Vance: First Photographer of California Indians?

PETER E. PALMQUIST

Who was the first to photograph the California Indian? When? Because of the vicissitudes of time it is unlikely that we will ever have a truly precise answer to these provocative questions. Nor will we be certain whether this earliest likeness was taken spontaneously, or as the result of a direct, premeditated effort to document the culture of these unique people.

Most likely, however, this first "shadow-catcher" was one of the many daguerrean artists who were led to California by the promises of a newly-discovered El Dorado. One of these artists, Robert H. Vance, easily stands out as a prime candidate for the honor of being the first to focus his camera on California's Native Americans. If not the actual first, Vance surely qualifies as a very important producer of such images. During the winter and spring of 1851, he produced an extraordinary series of 300 daguerreotypes "of the largest size" showing the splendor of California.

Produced at a direct cost of \$3,000, these "Views in California" were exhibited in New York City during the fall of that same year. Vance's exhibition listing, *Catalogue of Daguerreotype Panoramic Views in California*, annotates eleven Indian "Views":

56. Indian Hut near Yuba City.
57. View of Indians of the Stanislaus River dressed for a War Dance.
62. View of Indian Commissioners, Dr. Wozencraft, Col. Johnson, Indian Agent, and clerks, in treaty with the Indians.
65. View of Indian Village on Capt. Sutter's Plantation.
66. Indian Village near Yuba City.
67. View of four Indian Chiefs, and Wife and Sister of the celebrated chief Kasuse.