The Chihuahuan Desert: Beautiful But Deadly

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The Chihuahuan Desert is located in the southwest region of the United States and in northern Mexico. While the largest part of the desert is in Mexico parts of it stretch into Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. It is the largest American desert spanning approximately 175,000 square miles.
Climate and Ecosystem

The Chihuahuan Desert is a rain shadow desert. Temperatures range from below zero in the winter to 122 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. The Chihuahuan Desert has many smaller mountain ranges which creates lower elevation valleys and higher elevations points. Elevation ranges from 5,500 ft. at the highest point to 1000 ft. at the lowest above sea level. Rainfall averages are 15 in. per year with June, July, August, and September getting the most rainfall of approximately two inches. This scarcity of water creates an ecosystem where only specialized plants and animals can survive.

The Chihuahuan Desert elevation ranges from 1,000 to 5,500 ft.
Plants

There is a wide variety of plants in the Chihuahuan Desert. A few are the southwestern honeysuckle, roving sailor snap dragon vine, and thread leaf grandsel. These plants grow deep roots to conserve water. Unlike other plants in the Chihuahuan Desert plants from the cactus family are especially suited to desert climates. Cacti are a **succulent** that need very little water to survive. A cactus plant has prickly thorns that keeps animals away and protects their stored water supply.

*Thorns help protect cacti from animals.*
Animals

The Chihuahuan Desert has many different kinds of animals. Some are herbivores that eat only plants and some are carnivores that eat other animals.

Prey Animals
Rabbits, prairie dogs, and mule deer are generally considered prey animals. These animals are eaten by predators. Their main defense against a predator is speed and camouflage. Generally speaking these animals are herbivores.

This rabbit is a prey animal and is hunted by other animals as food.
Predators

Rattlesnakes, Gila monsters, and coyotes are just a few of the predators that live in the Chihuahuan Desert. These carnivores are stealthy and have great hunting skills to track and kill prey. They can go several days without eating.

A gila monster eating a rabbit. This animal is a predator.
Interesting Facts

There are many interesting facts about the Chihuahuan Desert.

- The Chihuahuan Desert has summer rains that come in June and July. They are called **monsoons**.
- The dust bowl has nine inches of dirt and can last for up to ten years.
- The Rio Grande River runs through the desert.
- The approximate age of the desert is 8,000 years.
- People would cross the Chihuahuan Desert to trade.

*Dust bowl of the Chihuahuan Desert*
The Chihuahuan Desert is a place of wonder and filled with unique animals and plants. Visitors to the desert are impressed by its size and its beauty. The Chihuahuan Desert is a great vacation destination for old and young alike.

Beautiful sunset on the Rio Grande River in the Chihuahuan Desert
Glossary

camouflage-an adaptation of a species that allows it to blend in to its surroundings.
elevation-the height to which something is elevated or to which it rises.
monsoons-any wind that changes direction with the seasons.
predators-an animal that hunts other animals for food.
prey-an animal that is hunted by other animals for food.
rain shadow desert-A rain shadow desert occurs when land is situated between two mountain ranges. This blocks rain from falling on the land between the mountain ranges.
sea level-the level of the ocean’s surface.
succulent-a plant having fleshy tissues that conserve moisture.
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