

# Comprehension

## Genre

### Informational Nonfiction

is a detailed composition that sets out to explain something by presenting facts about it.



## Summarize

### Main Idea and Details

As you read, fill in your Main Idea Chart.

Main Ideas	Details

## Read to Find Out

What characteristics allow desert animals to live in such a hot, dry place?

# A Walk in the Desert

*by Rebecca L. Johnson*

*with illustrations by Phyllis V. Saroff*



## Biomes of North America



Sunbeams are flickering over the landscape as the sun rises. A kit fox heads for her den as another day in the desert begins.

Deserts are surrounded by other kinds of landscapes. Scientists call these different land zones biomes. All the plants and animals in a biome form a community. In that community, every living thing depends on other community members for its survival. A biome's **climate**, soil, plants, and animals are all connected this way.

Deserts have a very dry climate. They do get a little rain, but it doesn't come regularly. One storm might drench a desert with several inches of rain in just a few hours. It might not rain again for months—even years.



A mother desert  
tortoise lays her  
eggs in sandy soil.  
The sun warms the  
eggs until they hatch.



Desert plants provide many animals with food and water. Here comes a desert tortoise. It shuffles slowly along and stops often to rest. The tortoise stretches its long neck to nibble a wildflower. Tortoises rarely drink. They get nearly all the water they need from the plants they eat.

Cacti also provide homes for desert animals. Halfway down a nearby saguaro's thick stem, a Gila woodpecker pecks a hole in the juicy flesh. It is making a nest for its eggs. Woodpeckers have nested in this cactus for many years, so they've made many holes in it.

Other creatures have moved into some of the old woodpecker holes. A pair of flycatchers lives in one. Another is home to a hive of honeybees. And peeking out of still another hole is an elf owl. It has white eyebrows and fierce yellow eyes.



A wood rat nibbles  
on the sweet fruit  
of a prickly pear cactus.



Not far from the saguaro, you see a very different kind of desert home. Jammed between a dead cactus and a fallen tree is a huge mound of tangled twigs. It's the nest of a wood rat.

Wood rats are also called pack rats. They use anything they can find to build enormous nests. A wood rat's nest might be made of sticks, rocks, leaves, cactus spines, or even bones. It may be as tall as a person and just as wide. The nest protects the wood rat from foxes, hawks, and other predators. It is also a cool place to hide from the hot sun.



### Main Idea and Details

What is the main idea in the second paragraph?



Many desert animals are nocturnal. They are active only at night, when it is cooler. Nocturnal desert-dwellers spend their days in burrows, dens, and other sheltered places. The kangaroo rat and the kit fox are nocturnal. They stay underground until the sun goes down.

*Elf owls are the smallest  
owls in the world. They are  
about the size of sparrows.*





A painted grasshopper  
uses its long legs to hop  
from plant to plant — and  
to escape being eaten.



But some desert animals are active during the day. Insects are on the move everywhere. Columns of ants march across the ground. Colorful beetles crawl up and down stems. Grasshoppers spring from leaf to leaf. Insect-eating spiders are busy, too. They spin **silken** webs among cactus spines.



The sun has climbed higher in the clear blue sky. Can you feel the heat? Desert lizards don't seem to mind. Their tough, scaly skin seals water inside their bodies and keeps them from drying out. Lizards rest on rocks, hunt insects, and cling to cactus stems. In one small patch of desert, you could see tiny skinks, chunky chuckwallas, spiny horned lizards, and **lumbering** Gila monsters.

*A horned lizard's spiny scales are a good defense against desert predators.*



A roadrunner's feet have two  
toes that point forward and  
two that point backward.  
This shape helps the bird  
grip the ground when it runs.



Suddenly, something streaks across your path. It's a speedy lizard, and right on its heels is a roadrunner. Roadrunners can fly. But these desert birds prefer to run after lizards and the other small animals they hunt.

Roadrunners have long, strong legs. They can run as fast as many lizards can. In fact, this time the bird is faster. The roadrunner catches the lizard by its tail and **swallows** it in one gulp.





Desert jackrabbits have longer ears than rabbits from other biomes. Long ears release heat and help jackrabbits stay cool.



Nearby, a jackrabbit looks for plants to nibble. Jackrabbits are even faster than roadrunners. They can outrun almost everything in the desert. They can even outrun coyotes—most of the time!

Coyotes eat rabbits when they can catch them. But they will eat just about anything, from birds and lizards to berries. To find underground water, they dig holes in dry streambeds. Coyotes can survive almost anywhere.

A mother scorpion carries  
her babies around on her  
back until they can survive  
on their own.



By noon, even the coyotes are panting. It's well over 100 degrees. The sun is a fireball overhead. Nearly all the daytime animals move into the shade of rocks and cacti during the hottest part of the day.



A rattlesnake's rattle is  
made up of a row of  
large, dry scales.



Take a tip from the animals. Find a place out of the sun to rest. Just be careful where you sit. Scorpions often **lurk** in crevices or under rocks during the day. A scorpion's tail has a stinger filled with poison. Few kinds of scorpions can kill a person. But the sting of any scorpion is very painful.

Watch out for hiding rattlesnakes and coral snakes, too. Their poison is deadly. You don't want to get within striking distance of either one.

Heat waves **shimmer** above the landscape. The leaves of the mesquite trees curl up. Curled leaves lose less water to the hot, dry air. The desert is very quiet. Most of the birds are silent. They seem to be waiting for the sun's fierce heat to fade.

Gradually, the sun moves lower in the sky. As shadows grow longer, the temperature starts to drop. Desert birds begin to sing again. At sunset, coyotes call to each other, barking and yelping. They join voices in an **eerie**, wailing song.



### Main Idea and Details

Name the main idea on these two pages. Which statements support the main idea?



**The hot desert day is over. The cool night is about to begin. Birds, lizards, and other daytime animals retreat to snug nests and safe hiding places. There they will sleep the night away.**



# Take a Walk with Rebecca

**Rebecca L. Johnson** grew up in South Dakota. Harsh prairie winters helped her prepare for working with scientists in Antarctica. Ms. Johnson has traveled to Antarctica twice and has written three books on the experience: *Braving the Frozen Frontier*, *Investigating the Ozone Hole*, and *Science on the Ice* (winner of the *Scientific American* Young Readers Award). She has also “walked” in several other biomes—the tundra, the rain forest, the prairie, and others—for the “Biomes of North America” series.

Rebecca studied Biology at Augustana College and has worked as a teacher and a museum curator. She enjoys scuba diving, water color painting, and cross country skiing, and lives in South Dakota with her husband.



Find out more about  
Rebecca L. Johnson at  
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## Author's Purpose

How do you think the author's own experiences influenced her purpose for writing *A Walk in the Desert*? Did she want to explain, inform, entertain, or persuade?



# Comprehension Check



## Summarize

Use your Main Idea Chart to summarize *A Walk in the Desert*. State the main ideas and the details that support those main ideas.

Main Ideas	Details

## Think and Compare



1. What is the main idea of the selection? Find two details that support that main idea. **Summarize: Main Idea and Details**
2. Reread the information about roadrunners on page 58. If roadrunners can fly but prefer to run, what can you conclude about their flying skills? **Analyze**
3. If you were taking a walk in the desert, which of the plants and animals described in this selection would you most want to see? Why? **Apply**
4. How do you think people who live in the desert might adapt to the **climate**? **Apply**
5. Read “Living in Alaska” on pages 46-47. Compare the plants and animals in Alaska’s environment with those in the desert. How are they similar? Use details from both selections in your answer. **Reading/Writing Across Texts**

