



News Release

Contact: Jill Ivie Beck
(805) 546-3108
FAX (805) 546-3921

Cuesta College Institutional Advancement/
Marketing & Communications
San Luis Obispo, CA 93403-8106
Email: jill_ivie@cuesta.edu

May 11, 2009

Cuesta College Biology Instructor and Students Make Rare Sighting of California Gila Monster

A class of 18 desert biology students from Cuesta College, led by a trio of Cuesta instructors, made history with the sighting of California's rarest lizard, the reclusive Gila monster during a four-day field trip to the East Mojave National Preserve.

"I had always heard rumors that there were Gila monsters in California, so when I was there and we saw it and I was all excited, I told the students, 'You don't realize what you are seeing here. It's been 27 years since we've seen one.'" said Ron Ruppert, the biological sciences division chair who led the trip that was assisted by Jane Donaldson and Dave Bowlus. "The record goes back to 1861 as the first credible record of a Gila monster. Since that time there's only been 26. Ours is the 27th."

The Gila monster, which takes its name from the Gila River basin in Arizona where the reptiles were once common, is the only venomous lizard in North America. The animals grow to 2 feet long. While more common in the Grand Canyon state and Nevada, observing the subspecies in California is a major occurrence that ripples through the scientific community, the Los Osos resident said.

The group from Cuesta observed a healthy young lizard, Ruppert estimated as 14 inches long, on May 2. Earlier in the day students had caught chuckwalla, a lizard that can grow to 16 inches long.

"They asked me if this was the biggest lizard in California," said Ruppert, 55. "I said there had been sightings of Gila monsters, but they probably don't occur anymore in California. They haven't been sighted in a long time, so yes this is probably the biggest lizard in California."

Later that day, Ruppert was driving one of two vans on a gravel road. He observed a lizard with pink bands on the lizard's beaded black skin before he slammed on the brakes and jumped out of the vehicle.

"Everyone knows I'm a lizard guy," said Ruppert, who has been at the college since 1978 and been visiting the Mojave Desert in search of the elusive Gila monster for several years before than. "I did my research on lizards. Friends say this couldn't happen to a more perfect person in terms of seeing a lizard — and seeing the rarest lizard in California."

The sighting occurred during a four-day annual field trip to the California State University Desert Studies Center, a field station located in Zzyzx, Calif., in the Mojave Desert.

Cuesta College news releases are available on the Internet at
<http://academic.cuesta.edu/pim/pr/index.htm>

###