

Learning About Lizards

INTRODUCTION

You have probably seen a lizard at some time or another. Perhaps you have wondered how these reptiles live, or of what value they are to man or other creatures. This activity will allow you to learn about the lives of lizards. By the time you finish your study, you should be able to identify some species of lizards on sight. You should gain some appreciation of the lizard's place in nature as well.

FEATURES OF LIZARDS

All reptiles are cold-blooded animals. Their body temperature changes as the temperature of their environment changes. Like other reptiles, lizards hibernate during cold weather. A lizard may spend the winter in a burrow, under a bed of leaves, in a cave or other sheltered spot. When the weather warms and the lizard's body temperature goes up, its life processes—breathing, heart rate, etc.—speed up, and it leaves its sheltered spot.

Many people believe that reptiles have slimy skin. Actually their skins are very dry. The slimy appearance of some lizards and snakes is due to the reflection of light by their scales.

Lizards are sometimes confused with other animals. Most lizards can be distinguished from snakes because they have legs; however, there are a few legless lizards. But lizards have eyelids, and their ears open from the back of the eyes. Snakes do not have either of these features. Lizards are not to be confused with salamanders, either. They have drier skins than salamanders do, and they have scales and claws which salamanders do not.

Lizards are often found under logs or rocks. You won't usually find them in water. There are no aquatic lizards in the United States,

although some lizards are very good swimmers. They feed mostly on insects and millipedes and are eaten, in turn, by cats, hawks, owls, snakes and larger lizards.

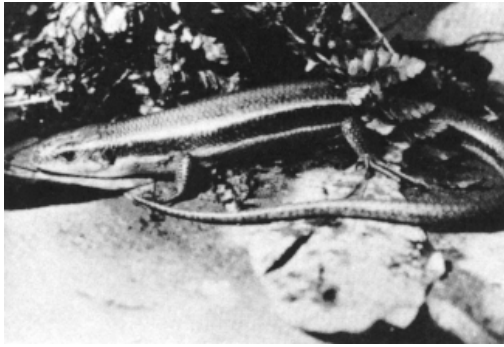
Lizards' tails can easily be broken off. A predator may grab onto the tail, but the lizard still has a chance to escape by leaving his tail behind. If the front part of the lizard isn't injured, it will eventually grow a new tail. The tip of a broken tail will wiggle as if it were alive.

Some lizards give birth to living young, but most of them lay eggs. The eggs may be deposited in sand, soft earth or under rocks. In the Southeast, the eggs are most likely to be laid in the summer and to hatch the following fall. Young lizards look like small adults when they hatch out.

There is a great variety of lizards to be found in the United States. *Fence swifts* are common in many places. They are brown or gray on top and have rough scales. During the mating season, the male stakes out his territory and will show his undersides to warn off other male fence swifts coming into his territory. A lizard will fight, if necessary, to defend his mating territory.

Skinks have smooth, polished scales; there are several kinds of skinks found in the Southeast. The glass lizard or "glass snake" is a legless lizard whose tail breaks easily. Its long tail will break into segments, and for this reason it is often mistakenly called a "jointed snake." The anoles are a group of lizards that can change colors to match their surroundings. Whiptail lizards can be recognized by their long tails and nervous prowling. Their food consists chiefly of insects, but also includes spiders and scorpions.





Five-lined Skink

There are only two poisonous lizards in the world—the Gila Monster of Arizona and New Mexico and its relative, the Mexican beaded lizard, found in Mexico. These lizards can be dangerous to man.

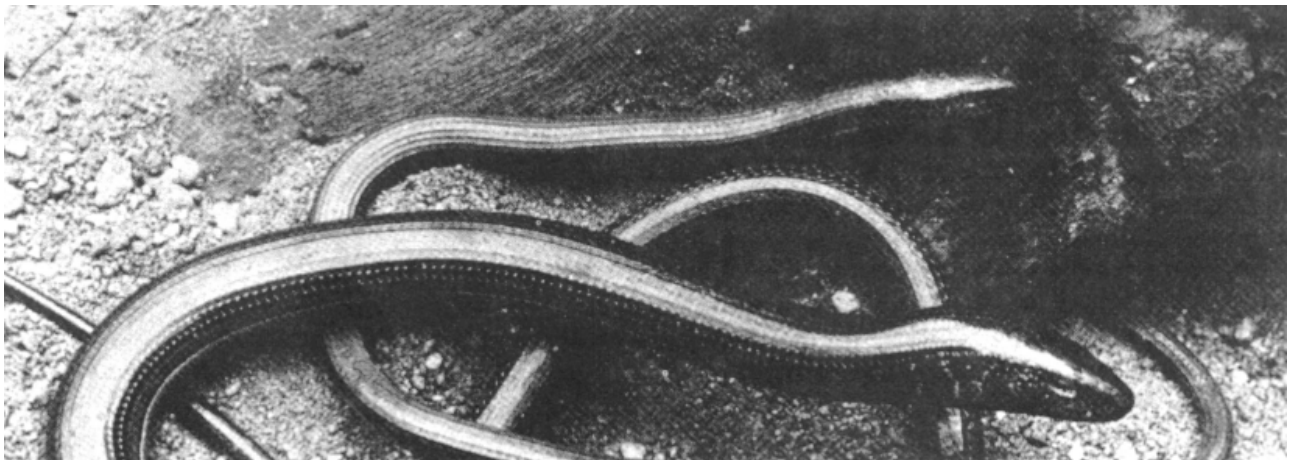
THINGS TO DO

1. Write a natural history paper about a lizard found in your state. You may use information gained through field observation, studies of captive lizards, conversation with a herpetologist and research in your local library. Include the following topics in your paper:
 - a. Scientific and common name
 - b. Description and identifying characteristics
 - c. Habitat requirements
 - d. Food and feeding habits
 - e. Method of reproduction
 - f. Range (where it is found in North America)
 - g. Natural enemies
 - h. Importance to man or other animalsPresent this paper at a 4-H meeting or in your school class.

2. Visit a museum or zoo which displays live lizards. Find out how these animals are studied and kept alive in captivity. You may be able to talk to a trained herpetologist if you make arrangements in advance. Report to your 4-H group on what you have learned. This may be done as a group project.
3. Learn about lizards by studying them in the field. Look for them under woodpiles, logs or flat rocks. Carry a guidebook with you to help you identify the lizards you may find. You will also need a small notebook and pencil for your notes. Record everything that you notice about a specimen. Include information on date, time, habitat, location, weather conditions and behavior for every lizard you observe.
4. Keep lizards as pets for closer study. (It is illegal to do this in some states without a permit.) Most captured lizards should be quickly identified and released, but you may want to keep a couple in captivity to study their habits more closely. Be certain that you do not injure or keep any lizards that are on the endangered species list! Do not keep the lizards for more than two or three weeks; release them *where you found them*. Release the lizards sooner if they show signs of illness or refuse to eat.

Follow these guidelines:

- a. Transporting the catch: Use fabric sacks. Do not leave the bags containing specimens in direct sunlight! Do not overcrowd the specimens by putting too many in the same sack or housing facilities.



Legless Lizards



Anole: "Chameleon"



Whiptail Lizard



Gila Monster

- b. Housing: An old aquarium with a heavy lid of wire screening may be used. Make the aquarium resemble the lizards' habitat as closely as possible.
- c. Food: Live insects or mealworms.
- d. Records: Study the lizards carefully and keep complete notes on their behavior.
- e. Report to your 4-H group or school class on what you have learned.

WORDS TO KNOW

Aquatic—Living in water

Habitat—The home of a plant or animal

Herpetologist—A person trained in the study of reptiles and amphibians

Hibernation—Spending the winter in a condition where the body processes—heart rate, respiration, etc.—are reduced to a very slow rate

Predator—An animal which kills and eats another animal

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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