

Lizards and Skinks of Pennsylvania

Lizards make up the largest living group of reptiles, numbering about 3,000 worldwide. They are more predominant in warmer, drier areas. In this country, most are found in the southwest. Pennsylvania has four species from two genera and two families. They become more rare as they move northward. The lizards common to Pennsylvania are harmless.

Lizards for the most part are diurnal. They live in trees, on the ground and in burrows beneath the ground. They breed in the spring and most lay eggs following internal fertilization. Lizards possess the sensations of smell and taste much as we know them. Snakes do not. However, like snakes, many lizards are also able to use the tongue and Jacobson's organ to sample the air around them.

Iguanid lizards (Family Iguanidae)

Northern fence lizard

Sceloporus undulatus hyacinthinus

Only one species of this family is found in Pennsylvania. The iguanids are most predominant in warm, dry regions and more than 40 different species inhabit North America. This family is very large both in the number of species and in their physical size. Some species reach 72 inches or more. Some of the iguanids are egg-layers. They are territorial in nature. Males defend their home stakes with an elaborate display of head bobbing and dramatic push-ups of the body, using the front legs. With mouth agape, they boldly inflate the chest and throat to present a menacing pose to anything that threatens.

Skinks (Family Scincidae)

Northern coal skink—

Eumeces anthracinus anthracinus

Five-lined skink—*Eumeces fasciatus*

Broadhead skink—*Eumeces laticeps*

The skink family is a group of smooth, shiny, almost slippery lizards. The cylindrical body and tail are covered with smooth scales. This group is found on every conti-

nent with the exception of Antarctica. Over 1,200 species occur worldwide; three species are found in Pennsylvania.

Northern Fence Lizard

Sceloporus undulatus hyacinthinus

General characteristics. The northern fence lizard belongs to a group of lizards commonly known as “spiny lizards.” It is the only one of its genus in Pennsylvania. The northern fence lizard is not a large lizard. Adults range in size from four to seven inches. It spends much of its time in trees where it hunts, rests and finds safety when frightened.

Identification. The northern fence lizard varies from gray to brown. Colors on the belly range from whitish to greenish blue to pale blue. There may be dark, wavy cross-bars on the back, which are most evident normally on the female. The male has a blue patch near the base of the throat. The scales on the back of this lizard are keeled and pointed. They are jagged and rough to the touch, which explains its nickname, “spiny” lizard.

Range. This reptile, territorial by nature, is located in roughly the southern two-thirds of Pennsylvania.

Habitat. Generally, the northern fence lizard prefers a sunny area of grassy or open woodland. It likes rotting logs and outcrops of rocks from where it can survey its domain. It often sits on a tree stump or fence, but usually is not far from a tree or wall where it can flee quickly to safety.

Food. Beetles are a favorite food of the northern fence lizard and are eagerly sought. When beetles are unavailable, the lizard turns to other insects, spiders and even snails when it can locate them.

Northern Coal Skink

Eumeces anthracinus anthracinus

General characteristics. A member of a single, very

Lizards and Skin

Five-lined skink

Eumeces fasciatus

Northern fence lizard

Sceloporus undulatus hyacinthinus



Reptiles of Pennsylvania

Broadhead skink

Eumeces laticeps

Northern coal skink

Eumeces anthracinus anthracinus



large family of skinks, the northern coal skink is difficult to distinguish from others of its genus. The coal skink does most of its foraging during daylight hours, as do other skinks. Adult sizes range from five to seven inches.

Identification. The body of the northern coal skink is brown. Two pairs of light stripes, each enclosing a dark band, extend from the neck onto the tail. There are no light lines on the head of the coal skink, which helps distinguish this skink from the two others found in the state. The breeding male might have a reddish head. The young have a blue tail, but otherwise are marked identically to the parents.

Range. In Pennsylvania, the northern coal skink is known from the northcentral, a portion of the northwest, and one southwestern county. Its population is scattered and does not occur in large numbers anywhere in its range. It is also found in portions of New York, the Virginias and Kentucky.

Habitat. The northern coal skink prefers damp, moist woods, especially those with an abundance of leaf matter or loose stones.

Food. Following the pattern of other skinks, the northern coal skink eats insects. It rummages among leaf litter and small stones in search of a variety of insects.

Five-Lined Skink

Eumeces fasciatus

General characteristics. The five-lined skink is another of the state's smooth, shiny lizards. It is most comfortable in a temperature range of 78 to 85 degrees. These temperatures suit Pennsylvania's lizards and they are most active in this range. Like other skinks, the five-lined skink is diurnal and spends much of the day in search of food. It reaches an adult size that varies from five to just over seven inches.

Identification. This skink is brown to black with five broad, light stripes running the length of the body. In some adults, the pattern nearly fades completely with age. As the ground color becomes lighter, the stripes become darker. The tail of the juvenile is bright blue, turning gray as the skink grows older.

Range. The five-lined skink inhabits about two-thirds of the state, generally south of a line drawn from Crawford County in the west to Bucks County in the east.

Habitat. It occasionally is seen in gardens or around homes, especially in damp areas, but it prefers humid woodlands.

Food. Although considered terrestrial, the five-lined skink will climb a decayed snag in its forest home where it knows insects can be found. It consumes insect larvae, spiders, crustaceans, worms and even small mice, a diet perhaps more varied than that of some other skinks.

Broadhead Skink

Eumeces laticeps

Candidate Species

General characteristics. The broadhead skink is the largest of three skinks that inhabit Pennsylvania. Adult sizes range from just over six inches to a bit more than 12 inches, including the tail.

Identification. The outstanding characteristic of this skink is its head. On the male, it is large and gives the impression of having swollen cheeks. The body of this reptile is brown to olive-brown and the breeding males are striking with their orange-red heads. There may be five light stripes down the body of both sexes during their early adult life, but these usually fade with age to become indistinguishable in the fully adult male.

Range. Pennsylvania is on the extreme northern limit of this reptile's range. It is found only in the southeast corner of the state, and extends to central Florida. It ranges as far west as Kansas.

Habitat. Largely a woodland creature, the broadhead skink is the most arboreal of the state's skinks. It likes moist woods but also resides in open areas that provide adequate protection in the form of vegetative debris or other matter.

Food. Insects make up the major portion of the diet. □