

Wildlife Express

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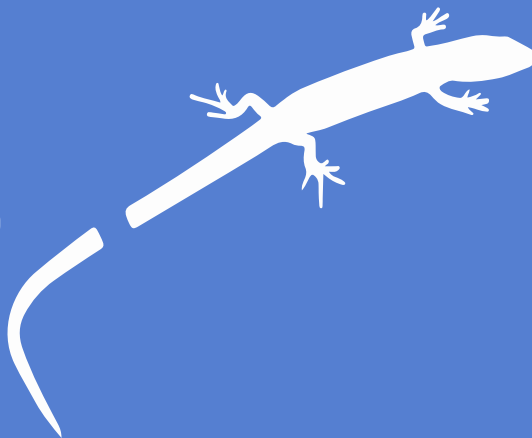
February 2021

Western Skink

Photos CC BY J. Maughn on Flickr

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The Wonderful Western Skink



Have you ever seen what you thought was a blue snake or worm poking out from under a rock? You might have even thought it was a blue ribbon. Well, next time you see something blue sticking out from under a rock, look a bit closer. The blue worm or ribbon you saw might actually be the tail of a western skink.

It is easy to tell western skinks from other Idaho lizards. Young western skinks have a bright blue tail. As they get older the tail may fade to a dull blue or gray color. Western skinks have small bodies, usually measuring two and one-half to three and one-half inches, but their tails are long. The total length, with the tail included, is between four and eight inches long. It's not only the tail that sets them apart. Western skinks look smooth and shiny. They have a wide brown stripe down the middle of the back. On each side of this stripe are thinner white or cream colored lines that run horizontally from the nose to the tail. Then there is a wider dark brown or black stripe, followed by another white or cream colored stripe.

Western skinks are lizards that can be found across most of Idaho. They can be found in grasslands and woodlands near rocky areas and streams. They seek shelter under rocks and in burrows that they dig.

During the summer they spend most of the day basking in the sun and looking for food in the morning and late afternoon. If it gets really hot, they will **aestivate** (ES-ti-vate). This means that they rest and slow their body functions down. It is kind of like hibernation, but it happens in the summer. During the winter, they burrow into the ground and hibernate through the cold days.

Western skinks are agile and fast. They will actively stalk and chase down prey. They look for insects, spiders and earthworms under plants and rotting logs.

You may find western skinks that have reddish-orange chins. Sometimes this reddish-orange color will appear on the sides, tip and underside of the tail. This means it's breeding time. The reddish-orange color is a way to showoff to other western skinks. Western skinks mate in May or June. The female makes a nest burrow under rocks or rotting logs. She lays two to six eggs in July that hatch in August. The female guards her eggs and stays with the skinklets (young skinks) until they are ready to go out on their own.

Look for western skinks next time you are wandering around Idaho. You will be lucky to see one. Western skinks are secretive and move so quickly. Sometimes it is just a flash that is seen!



WHAT'S A REPTILE?

When you think of a reptile, you may think of a snake or lizard. Maybe a turtle pops into your mind. People often think of reptiles as scaly, cold-blooded animals that usually lay eggs.

Some scientists that group, or classify, animals are starting to look at reptiles a bit differently. Some divide reptiles into four groups. The first group includes turtles. The second group is lizards and snakes; the third group would be crocodiles and their relatives. The last group is the birds!

Some scientists put birds in this group because bird skulls and eggs are so similar to those of reptiles. These scientists believe the similarities between bird skulls and eggs and reptile skulls and eggs are more important than the differences between the two. They are not as concerned about the fact that birds are warm-blooded, and all other reptiles are cold-blooded. Believe it or not, when we look at the cells of crocodiles, birds, and lizards, crocodiles actually have more in common with birds than they do with lizards. You may be wondering about the feathers on birds. They don't look much like scales, but they really are scales that have changed over time to help birds fly. What do you think? Do you think birds should be in the reptile group? More evidence may be needed before a clear answer is reached.

For now, let's leave birds out of the reptile group and take a closer look at what makes a reptile a reptile.

You can find reptiles living on every continent

except Antarctica. Most reptiles have a hard time staying warm. They can't make heat inside their bodies, so Antarctica would just be a giant freezer and graveyard for them. It is too cold! Since Idaho has pretty cold winters, we don't have as many reptiles as some other states. We have one turtle, 10 lizards and 13 snakes.

Most reptiles lay eggs outside of their bodies but not all. In Idaho, we have two lizards, the alligator lizard and the short-horned lizard, that give birth to live young. We also have four snakes that give birth to live young, the rubber boa, western rattlesnake, common garter snake and terrestrial garter snake.

Reptiles are covered by a thick skin protected by scales. Scales are similar to your fingernails. They are made up of dead cells and form a kind of tough armor around the body. Scales offer protection from the sun and help reptiles retain water in their bodies. Lizards and snakes have scales on their bodies, and turtles have scales on their shells.

Reptiles come in all shapes and sizes. They can be really big. Saltwater crocodiles can grow to be over 23 feet long. Other reptiles are small. A gecko that lives on the British Virgin Islands is less than an inch long! Reptiles may come in different shapes, sizes and live in many different habitats. One thing they all have in common is they are all interesting creatures!



Photos Gopher Snake
iStock, Prairie
Rattlesnake Blotch
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Garter Snake CCBY
John Slamander on
iNaturalist.

DO LIZARDS REALLY HAVE COLD BLOOD?

MAYBE...



If you hear an animal is cold-blooded, does that mean the animal's blood is actually cold? Well, not really. It means they are the same temperature as their surroundings. If a lizard is lying on sand that is 60 degrees, the lizard will also be 60 degrees. Snakes, lizards, turtles, insects, fish and frogs are all cold-blooded animals.

Some people call cold-blooded animals ectothermic (ek-toe-THER-mik) animals. Ecto means outside, and therm means heat. Ectothermic animals get heat from outside their bodies. You may also hear people call them **poikilotherms** (poy-KEE-lo-therms). This is just a fancy word for a cold-blooded animal.

Cold-blooded animals are most active in warm weather. Cold weather slows down their muscles. That's why cold-blooded animals lay or bask in the sun. The sun helps to warm them up. If they get too warm, they need to move to a shady spot or go in a burrow. Colder weather can kill cold-blooded animals. They need to migrate to warmer places or move underground. Some cold-blooded animals, like bees and dragonflies, shiver to stay warm.

Cold-blooded animals have a real advantage in deserts. Deserts are warmer, and food is often harder to find. Cold-blooded animals don't need to eat as much as warm-blooded animals. Sometimes they can go months between meals. This is why you often see more cold-blooded animals living in deserts than warm-blooded animals.

Calling an animal cold-blooded may be a bit confusing. Next time you are talking about a cold-blooded animal, how about calling it an ectothermic animal or a poikilotherm? You may teach others a new word and teach them the true meaning of the term "cold-blooded."



Photos: Sagebrush Lizard CCBY Todd Pierson on Cal Photos, Bee CCBY Tigger T on Flickr, lizard on Shutterstock.



Clever Defenses

Can you think of an animal that has a clever way of protecting itself? Animals may use color, armor, or even poison to protect themselves.

Western skinks have some amazing clever defenses. Like other lizards western skinks can run fast to get away from predators. They also bite hard! Once they grab something, it can be difficult to get them to let go. They may even play dead. The most amazing thing they do is perform **autotomy** (AH-ta-te-me) or self-amputation. They can make their tails fall off! The amputated tail thrashes and wiggles around. The tail looks a bit like a giant worm or small snake. The tail attracts the attention of a predator away from the escaping skink. The tail will grow back, but it will look a bit different. It will probably not be blue and often is misshapen.

Turtles use armor. Turtle shells are made of bone. The outside is covered with scales called scutes. The patterns and colors on the scutes help turtles to camouflage or blend in with their surroundings. If camouflage doesn't work, turtles can seek protection inside their shells. Turtles' necks are very flexible, and have loose skin. This allows turtles to pull their necks inside the shell when danger is near. Most turtles fold their necks in an "S" shape inside the shell. Predators have a very hard time getting turtles out of their shells.





Some lizards also have armor. Horned lizards are covered by sharp, pointy scales. Horned lizards have another way to protect themselves. They can squirt blood out of the corner of their eyes! The blood may travel as far as three feet. This definitely will startle a predator!

Poison is a good defense, too. Sometimes an animal might not look dangerous. Many frogs, toads and salamanders have glands on them that make poison. If they aren't poisonous, they may taste awful. Poisonous animals are sometimes bright and colorful. Their bright colors are a warning to stay away.

Can you think of other clever ways animals protect themselves? There are just about as many clever defenses as there are animals.



Photos: Western Tiger Salamander CCBY Kuribo on Wikimedia, Greater Short Horned Lizard, AZ. Carla Kishianami Flickr, Eumeces skiltonianus, CCBY William Flaxington on CalPhotos, Rattlesnake photos CCBY IDFG, Woodhouse's Toad (Anaxyrus woodhousii), Andrew DuBois on Flickr.



Do Lizards Make Good Pets?

Lizards, frogs, snakes and turtles are such interesting animals. Many people would like to keep them as pets, but keeping these animals as pets may cause problems.

Some reptiles and amphibians are bred in cages and are meant to be pets. Others are taken out of the wild. One frog that has been hurt a lot by the pet trade is the endangered painted burrowing frog in Madagascar. Thousands of frogs have been collected to sell as pets. So many have been captured that there are not enough frogs left in the wild to breed and replace the ones taken. People are trying to breed these frogs in cages. If they can breed the frogs in captivity, then maybe people will leave the wild frogs alone.



It may seem fun to keep lizards as pets, but it can be tricky keeping them alive. Animals are adapted to live in their unique habitats. It is hard to recreate an ecosystem in a cage. Lizards are sensitive animals. It is important that they have the proper temperature and humidity to be healthy. The smallest change in their habitat can have life-threatening effects. There's no change greater than being taken from the wild and put in a cage!

Idaho has laws about keeping wild reptiles and amphibians as pets. A person must have a hunting or trapping license to capture or keep native reptiles and amphibians. Up to four of the same kind can be kept. There may also be other state, federal or city regulations. Check with Idaho Fish and Game to understand the rules before your family decides to capture and keep a lizard as a pet.

The place for Idaho's wild animals is in the wild. This is best for lizards and will help ensure Idaho has healthy lizards for years to come.



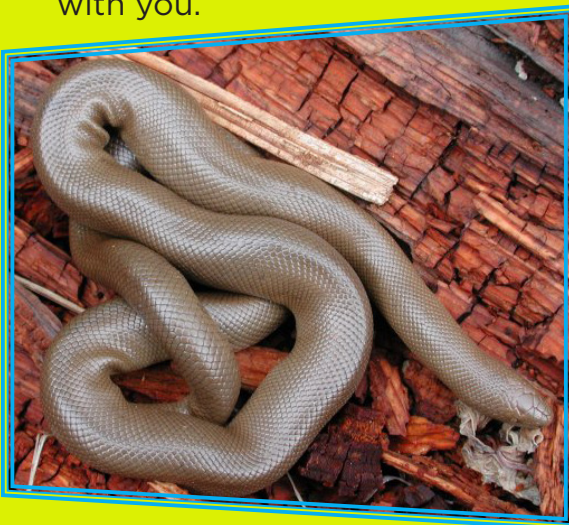


BE OUTSIDE
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE

Be Outside! Go Herping!

Have you ever heard of herpetology? In Greek, *herp* means creeping, so *herpetology* is the study of creeping things. It is the study of reptiles and amphibians. Many people just call them “herps” for short.

It is fun to look for amphibians and reptiles and learn about what they need to survive. If you want to go “herping” and look for reptiles or amphibians, here are some things to keep in mind. Never go looking on your own; go in a group and take an adult with you.



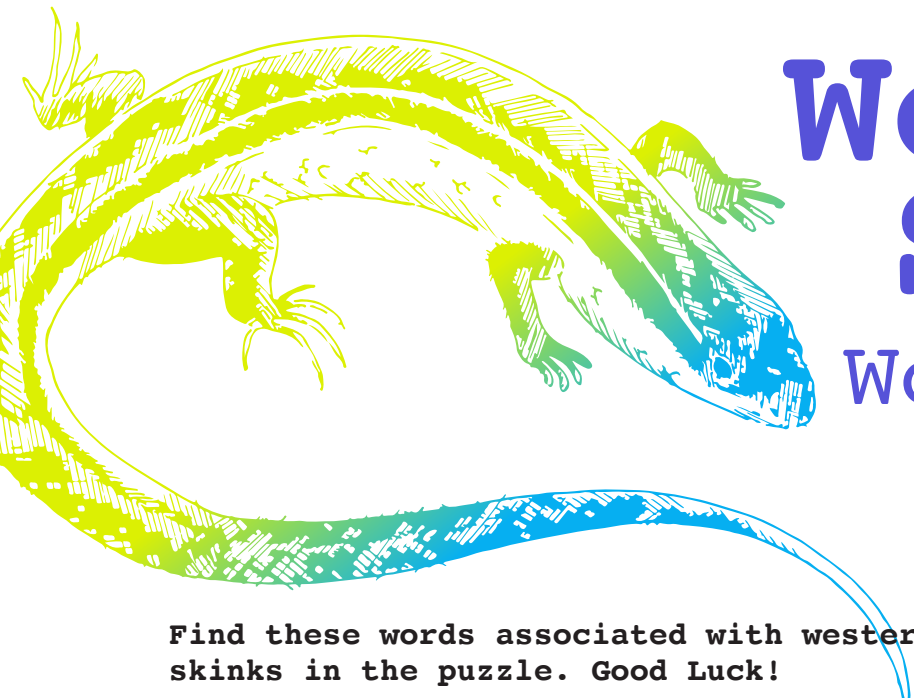
You are more likely to see an amphibian or reptile in the spring or early summer during breeding seasons. Use a good sturdy stick to flip things over. Many herps hide under rocks, logs and leaves, so looking under things is a good place to start. Look for amphibians when the sun is going down and at night; reptiles are usually seen during the day.

If someone in your group has a hunting or trapping license, you can capture the animal to observe it for a while. Herps can bite! Use a net and wear thick leather gloves when handling animals and never handle a rattlesnake. Place the animal in a clear plastic box. Amphibians will probably need a bit of water in the box. Once you are done looking at your herp, put it back where you found it.



Herpetology can be fun! Read books and watch videos to learn more about amphibians and reptiles. Then go exploring and look for herps around your neighborhood.

Photos top to bottom: Garter Snake CCBY John G Salamander on iNaturalist, Rubber Boa CCBY William Bosworth for IDFG, Western Skink CCBY Nathan Court on Wikipedia.



Western Skink

Word Search



Find these words associated with western skinks in the puzzle. Good Luck!

AGILE
AUTOTOMY
BASKING
BLUE TAIL
EARTHWORMS

AESTIVATE
ECOTHERMIC
EGGS
FAST
HERPETOLOGY

HIBERNATE
INSECTS
NATIVE
POIKILOTHERM
REPTILE

ROCKS
SKINKLET
SPIDERS
STRIPES
WILD

S H Y L D H A M R O C K S E I
I E G N F U F R B H M R K G I
H G P L I A T E U L B W Y G F
I T K I A B S H W M I V R S C
B E H E R P E T O L O G Y I C
E L A T F T Z O D W S A M E V
R K E R A N S L O A E R L G Y
N N V I T W I I G S E I D M B
A I I J I H N K T H G T O H A
T K T H Q S W I T A Y T N N S
E S A S E K V O M Y O A X T K
A J N C N A T P R T L N D J I
N U T J T C C I U M P H N S N
T S K E E S W A M U S Z Z J G
R E P T I L E S R E D I P S N



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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!
If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to: adare.evans@idfg.idaho.gov or Wildlife Express, Idaho Fish and Game PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707