

Photo: B. Radke



## Western Skink

**Scientific name:** *Eumeces skiltonianus*

Western Skinks are an exquisitely coloured lizard with a body form similar to that of the Northwestern Alligator Lizard. Skinks have a long, narrow pointed head, long body, and short legs. They grow to a maximum of 20 cm in total length. Skinks are most striking as juveniles. Decked out in smooth, shiny scales, the brown back and grey sides contrast with the 4 creamy stripes running from head to tail, 2 along the back and 1 along each side. Most noticeable, however, is the bright blue tail, which normally is longer than the body. With age, these markings fade. However, some Skinks (especially males in breeding season) develop reddish patches on the chin and sides of the head seasonally.

If feeling threatened, a Western Skink usually wiggles its way under a nearby rock or shrub using its snake-like body movement. They never venture far from shelter. If grabbed, either by a predator or a human, a Skink will bite and 'release' (autotomize) its tail. The tail will thrash and twitch for a few minutes after being dropped, which is especially distracting when the tail is the bright blue tail of a juvenile. After autotomy, Skinks slowly regenerate their tails (often as big or bigger than the original); however, the new tail is rarely, if ever, blue.

### **Making a living**

During winter, Western Skinks hibernate in communal dens (hibernacula). Skinks don't appear to be particular about whom they bed down with: there are records of Western Skinks hibernating not only with other skinks, but also with Northwestern Alligator Lizards, Rubber Boas, and possibly Rattlesnakes.

Mating occurs in spring, upon emergence from the hibernaculum. Skinks, like Alligator Lizards, do not travel far from their hibernacula. They tend to mate and feed within a small radius of the den. Skinks are oviparous, meaning they lay eggs and the young develop outside of their mother's body. Females dig nests under cover objects, where they lay an average of 2 to 6 eggs in July or August. Female Skinks then do something unusual for a lizard – they provide care for their eggs! Female Skinks often behave territorially in the area of their nests, defending their eggs aggressively.

During the summer, both male and female Skinks will excavate burrows with their snouts. When not hunting or basking, Western Skinks stay under cover, either in their burrows, or under debris such as leaf litter. This helps them avoid predators such as birds, mammals, and other reptiles.

### **What's for dinner?**

Skinks are diurnal predators, and will stalk their prey with great concentration and speed. Western Skinks mainly dine on insects such as caterpillars, moths, beetles, grasshoppers, and crickets, as well as spiders.

### **Places and spaces**

Western Skinks are at the northern most extent of their range in south-central B.C. Their known range extends east to Kootenay Lake and west to Princeton. One record exists on Vancouver Island, but whether the Western Skink still, if ever, existed there is questionable. Because of the uncertainty about its range and population size, please report any sightings to your local branch of the Ministry of Water, Land, and Air Protection!

Skinks inhabit many of the same habitats as the Northwestern Alligator Lizard. They may be found in Bunchgrass, Ponderosa Pine, Interior Douglas-fir, and occasionally Engelmann Spruce -Subalpine Fir and Cedar-Hemlock ecosystems.

Within these habitat types, Western Skinks need abundant plant cover, as well as rocks, logs, stumps, and bark for foraging and cover, sunny openings for basking, and south facing slopes and rocks for nesting and hibernacula.

### **Past, present, and...future?**

Little is known about this species' population size or structure, but in general, where Skinks and Alligator Lizards coexist, Skinks appear to be the less abundant species. Skinks are threatened by increasing habitat loss due to human activities, especially residential construction and rock removal. In addition, collectors sometimes illegally take Western Skinks from the wild. Western Skinks are wildlife, not pets - while their patterns are very attractive, Skinks are protected under the provincial wildlife act and cannot be handled, collected, or traded.

Because of these threats, its apparently low population size, and the general lack of population data, Western Skinks are blue-listed provincially. In addition, in 2002, the federal Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) classified the Western Skink as a species of special concern.