

LONDON, ESSEX & HERTFORDSHIRE AMPHIBIAN AND REPTILE TRUST

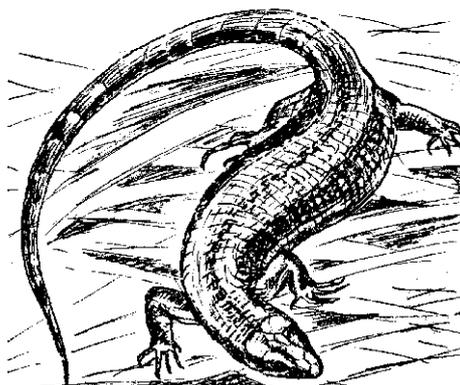
Registered Charity No. 1089466

Common Lizard (*Zootoca vivipara*)

FACT SHEET No. 7

Recognition

Adults: up to 16 cm, of which two thirds may be undamaged tail. Very variable in colour, often brownish above, with darker blotches in males and lighter stripes in females along the flanks. Males also have larger heads and yellow-orange bellies, with a heavy scattering of black spots. Melanistic (all black) specimens occur not infrequently.



Status & Distribution

Common lizards are widespread throughout the United Kingdom and Eire, although they are not present in the Shetland Islands or the Outer Hebrides. They may also be locally rare in urbanised areas and in intensive agricultural landscapes.

General Ecology

The common lizard emerges from hibernation in early spring and spends just a few weeks basking before mating in late April and May. After a twelve-week gestation period, females give birth to an average of eight young, enclosed in thin membranes, from which they "hatch" immediately. This viviparous (live-bearing) characteristic enables the species to occur throughout Britain and at high altitude. It occupies a wide variety of habitats, such as grassland, meadows, moor, heaths, rail and road embankments and other "brownfield" sites, and coastal dunes.

The young are born in either late July and early August, depending on latitude, altitude and the warmth of the summer. They are darker than their parents but otherwise perfect 4 cm long minatures of the adults. Like their parents, they can voluntarily shed their tails in defence, called autotomy, if grasped by a predator, leaving a stump which can re-grow to a fair degree in a few months.

Major predators include adders, smooth snakes, weasels, stoats, kestrels and domestic cats. In turn, common lizards feed on small, fast-moving invertebrates, such as spiders and grasshoppers. They hibernate in late

October in frost-free underground sites, sometimes in the company of other reptile species.

Conservation

Although probably the most widespread of our reptiles, the name "common" lizard is a misnomer in many areas today, where once they were more abundant. Like all our native reptiles, they receive legal protection under the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981, as amended) from killing and injuring. However, losses continue due to insufficient consideration of the possible presence of these animals when habitats are destroyed.

This occurs regularly, even during otherwise lawful developments, because the animals are overlooked in many general wildlife surveys and also at the planning application stage. It is, therefore, crucial that remaining populations are identified and records of their locations are known by the relevant county Amphibian & Reptile Groups. This will help to safeguard these areas from any future threats from development or even a lack of sympathetic management making the habitat less suitable for lizards.

Frequent Questions

My cat often brings in lizards - what can I do?

Apart from keeping this efficient reptile predator indoors, the answer is nothing directly. However, since the cat has shown the presence of lizards nearby, you can help to identify the location of colony by walking through areas of rough grass, scrub and heath, and then sending your record to your county Amphibian & Reptile Group, as there may well be a more serious threat to the colony in the form of a future development to the site.

How can I improve my garden for common lizards?

If your garden adjoins a lizard habitat, you can improve it for them by leaving an area to grow wild to provide cover and food, and by adding some rocks and logs for them to use as basking sites.

Further Information

Lizards of the British Isles

Snakes and lizards

Reptiles and amphibians in Britain

P. Stafford

T. Langton

D. Frazer

Shire Publications

Whittet Books

Collins New Naturalist