

# LONDON, ESSEX & HERTFORDSHIRE AMPHIBIAN AND REPTILE TRUST

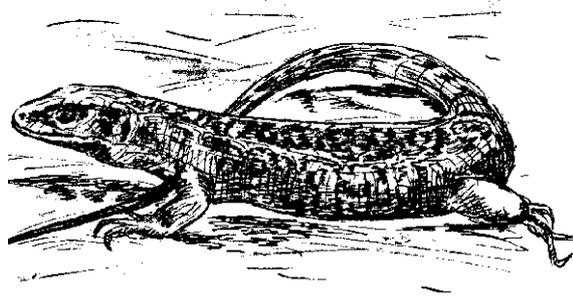
Registered Charity No. 1089466

## Sand Lizard (*Lacerta agilis*)

## FACT SHEET No. 8

### Recognition

Adults: 15 - 20 cm. A more robust-looking animal than the common lizard, which also appears less dorso-ventrally flattened. Grey or light brown ground colour and rows of dark blotches with white centres, called ocelli, along the flanks and back. In late spring, males develop strikingly green flanks.



### Status & Distribution

This is the rarest of our native lizards, with only a few thousand animals left. Their distribution is concentrated mainly on the heaths of east Dorset, north east Hampshire and south west Surrey. A remnant northern population exists on the sand dunes at a coastal site in Lancashire. These animals have distinct colour variations compared with southern individuals. Sand lizards are fully protected under the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981, as amended) and have been re-introduced under Natural England's Species Recovery Programme to several areas where they formerly occurred.

### General Ecology

The sand lizard is very much a continental species that is on the edge of its range in Britain. Their prime habitat requirement is a sandy substrate for successful incubation of their eggs. This restricts them to lowland heaths and a few coastal dune systems, although both are vanishing habitats.

They hibernate in burrows, which they may dig for themselves in loose soil, and emerge in late April. Males develop their bright emerald breeding colours after sloughing and defend small territories from other males by stereotyped posturing, although some encounters may result in fighting. Four weeks after mating, females dig burrows in open patches of sand and lay an average of 6 - 8 eggs that are left to incubate. The hatchlings, which first appear in late August, are dark with white ocelli and take two or three years to mature. Adults enter hibernation relatively early in the year, often in September.

They are more timid than the common lizard and are well camouflaged amongst the heather. Sand lizards feed on invertebrates, such as spiders,

grasshoppers, crickets and even young slowworms and their own offspring. They are, in turn, predated by many mammals, birds and occasionally the very rare smooth snake.

### **Conservation**

There has been a massive decline in sand lizard populations since the last war, due largely to the destruction and degradation of their main habitats. As heathland has been burnt, afforested, destroyed for housing and road schemes, improved for agriculture or lost through lack of management, the sand lizard's fate has followed that of its under-valued habitat.

Existing areas of heath are often so small and fragmented that they can be completely destroyed by fires or damaged by off-road vehicles and motorbikes. As an example, of their rapid decline in the 1970's, the number of populations in Surrey was reduced from around 50 to just 2! Holiday developments have eliminated them from the north Wales coast and they have disappeared from Kent and Sussex.

Recent attempts have been made to increase the number of populations, especially in north Wales, West Sussex and the New Forest, through captive breeding and a habitat restoration programme. Their long-term future, however, depends on continued site protection and sympathetic habitat management.

### **Frequent Questions**

*We have seen lizards in sandy, coastal areas - are they sand lizards?*

Historically, common lizards were also called "sand" lizards when found in dunes and heathland. The shy habits of the sand lizard make it harder to see, even in those areas where it still occurs, so it is more likely that a casual observer will have seen a common lizard. If an animal matches the sand lizard's description and is within its known range, it is possible that you may have seen one. In this case, you should report your observation to the relevant county Amphibian & Reptile Group.

### **Further Information**

Lizards of the British Isles	P. Stafford	Shire Publications
Snakes and lizards	T. Langton	Whittet Books
Reptiles and amphibians in Britain	D. Frazer	Collins New Naturalist