



LITTLE BROWN SKINK OR GROUND SKINK (*SCINCELLA LATERALIS*) OBSERVATION GUIDE FOR HERPSCAPERS

by John Byrd

INTRODUCTION:

Little brown skinks are one of the smallest and most common southeastern lizards. Look for them under debris (leaves, logs, etc.) in edge habitat where woodlands and fields meet. They are often found in suburban areas hiding under boards or tin. Please remember, each natural or manmade object you turn is a potential “home invasion”! Be respectful by limiting the number of homes you invade and carefully replace each natural shelter back to its original position. Little brown skinks eat a wide variety of invertebrates, ranging from termites and roaches to spiders and millipedes. In turn, they are food for a host of predators, including many species of snakes, birds, small mammals, and even some spiders are known to prey on them. Most lizards are insect eating machines and making the most of their ecological services to help maintain a balance of plant eating insects through backyard habitat projects is a much wiser and safer strategy than using pesticides.



Little Brown Skinks have a long tails for their size, but never have blue tails like other skink species. But like other members of the skink family they may drop their tails when attacked by a predator. A wiggling tail is hopefully all the predator is left with while the lizard escapes.

IDENTIFICATION:

Little brown skinks are 3 to 5 inches long and have a wide brown band down the back which is bordered on each side by darker stripes. They have a long tails for their size, but never have blue tails like other skink species. If the lizard is in hand (careful, the tail readily breaks off) look for the yellow belly of the male, especially during the spring mating season, which contrasts with the lighter color of the female belly. Their long tail and body movements make them appear to “swim” through the leaves as they flee from danger.

BEHAVIOR:

Little brown skinks are ground lovers and unlike other skinks, this species does not climb in order to bask or escape from predators. Search under leaves, logs, boards, tin, tar paper, etc. in order to find them. Before trying to grab one, observe its behavior response to being exposed – does the lizard freeze or immediately try to scamper away. Like other members of the skink family, they may drop their tails when attacked by a predator.



A wiggling tail is hopefully all the predator is left with while the lizard escapes. Tail loss may save a lizard's life, but it may also seriously handicap them in several ways. The tail stores fat, thus helping the lizard survive when food sources are scarce. The normal growth of a tailless lizard is interrupted and a juvenile may stop growing altogether while its tail is regenerating. An adult missing a tail has compromised reproductive success. It has also been shown that tailless lizards have balance problems, resulting in reduced mobility, thus making them more susceptible to predators. One of the more interesting behaviors of some lizards, including skinks, is the combination of tail loss and self-cannibalism. In this situation an individual loses its tail to a predator such as a bird which fails to eat the wiggling appendage, the tailless lizard then returns to the attempted predation site and eats its own tail. Keep in mind that the relentless pressure of natural selection may well favor this kind of behavior. As mentioned above, the tail is a valuable resource and the potential risk of returning to the scene of the attack and recouping lost calories may be worth the gamble.

Little brown skink females hide their eggs in decaying wood or vegetation and unlike the females of most other southeastern Skinks, do not guard and care for the eggs. Why females of this species abandon their eggs leads to some interesting speculation. The fact that little brown skinks may lay up to four clutches of 1 to 7 eggs in a single reproductive season puts a huge energy demand on the females. Their petite size combined with the energy drain, especially if they produce multiple clutches, may favor finding good egg laying sites and foraging for food over egg protection. There are other possibilities – larger skinks could potentially protect their eggs from a larger range of predators (spiders, other lizards, small snakes) better than little brown skinks. Thus the risk-benefit ratio for a small lizard would be greater than for larger species. If the skink doesn't survive, there is no future egg production. Thinking about why some animals behave in one way while closely related species behave differently is always time well spent. But in order for these thought experiments to be productive, someone must do the relentless and time consuming work of researching the life history of each species.

LEARNING MORE:

There are numerous resources on lizard biology and species identification. The books and websites listed below will help answer many of your questions, but hopefully not all of them.

Books:

- 1) [Lizards – Windows to the Evolution of Diversity](#), (2003) by Erick R. Pianka and Laurie J. Vitt. If you are a serious fan of lizards (or animal behavior in general) this is a must have book. I regret it was not around when I was teaching high school biology.
- 2) [Lizards & Crocodilians of the Southeast](#), (2009) by Whit Gibbons, Judy Greene, and Tony Mills. For those living in the Southeast, this book will not only help you identify the lizard species you are observing, but will also reward you with a wealth of natural history information.
- 3) [Peterson Field Guides – Reptiles and Amphibians – Eastern/Central North America](#), (1998) by Roger Conant/Joseph T. Collins. This book should always be within reach. There is also a Western Peterson Field Guide for reptiles and amphibians.

Websites:

- 1) http://tolweb.org/treehouses/?treehouse_id=2488 – This website features “Life as a Lizard Unit and Role Playing Game,” created by Arizona Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, AZPARC. The site has well written lessons for classroom teachers or anyone interested in teaching and learning about lizard behavior. There is also a series of videos that show lizard behaviors.
- 2) <http://srelherp.uga.edu/lizards/index.htm> - The Savannah River Ecology Lab has crisp photographs and natural history information on 13 of the 20 native lizards found in the Southeastern United States.
- 3) <http://www.discoverlife.org/mp/20q?guide=Lizards> – This is the Discover Life site which has a neat graphic key and will help you better understand descriptive terminology used for lizards.

