



Eastern Fence Lizard

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Judy Gallagher

Eastern Fence Lizard

(*Sceloporus undulatus*)

This common lizard is one of North Carolina's more conspicuous and familiar reptiles, deriving its common name from an earlier time when wooden fences were more common. Such structures are favored habitats for these quick and agile climbers, which are sometimes referred to by such names as "fence swifts," "pine swifts" or "wood lizards." The scientific name was coined in reference to the femoral pores — a row of small holes on the underside of the animal's thighs — and the dark, undulating lines on the back.

Description

A fence lizard's dorsal coloration is usually gray, brown or bronze, usually with several narrow, dark, wavy crossbands, which are more conspicuous in females and juveniles. The belly is white or cream colored with scattered small black flecks. Adult males have patches of bright iridescent blue, greenish blue or bluish black on the throat and sides of the belly, sometimes covering the entire underside. These patterns are faint or lacking in females and juveniles. The scales are pointed and overlapping, and the dorsal scales are keeled, giving the lizard a rough or spiny appearance. It is the state's only native lizard that appears rough or spiny, and it is identified easily on that basis.

History and Status

The fence lizard is one of the most common and widespread lizards in North Carolina. Many populations in urban and suburban areas have been reduced or eliminated by habitat destruction or other human-induced factors, but the species remains common in many areas. It is not listed under any category of special protection.

Habitats & Habits

Fence lizards occupy a variety of habitats but are most common in relatively dry, open woodlands of pines and hardwoods. They avoid very wet or heavily shaded habitats. They are highly arboreal and are frequently found on or near structures such as trees, logs, stumps, rock outcrops, buildings, and rock or brush piles. They are diurnal (active during the day) and often bask on sunny days, quickly dashing up a tree or beneath a sheltering object if disturbed.

Male fence lizards are territorial and actively defend their breeding areas against rival males, usually, by displaying their bright blue underside with a series of bobbing "pushups." If such display fails, combat may ensue.

Fence lizards are preyed upon by various snakes and carnivorous birds and mammals. They rely largely on camouflage and speed to escape predators. A captured

The eastern fence lizard gets its name from an earlier time when wooden fences were more common.

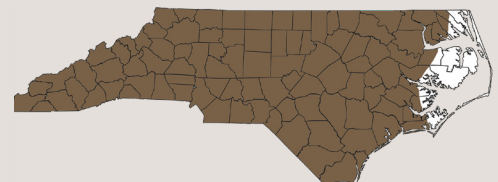


Eastern fence lizard (Photo: Judy Gallagher)

Range and Distribution

The fence lizard occurs from southern New York to central Florida, and throughout much of the East and Midwest, north to southern South Dakota and Colorado, south into north-central Mexico, and west into Utah and Arizona. Of the eight recognized races or subspecies, the northern fence lizard (*Sceloporus undulatus hyacinthinus*) occupies about the northeastern one-third of the overall range, including North Carolina. It occurs throughout most of the state except for the highest elevations in the Mountains and portions of the eastern Coastal Plain, including the Outer Banks and many tidewater areas and dense pocosin wetlands.

Range Map



■ Fence Lizard Range Map

Eastern Fence Lizard

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Habitats & Habits (continued)

individual may also bite or feign death, and, like all other native lizards, fence lizards have fractured planes in the vertebrae of their tails that can cause the tail to break easily if it is seized, often allowing the lizard a chance to escape. A broken tail will partially regenerate in time.

These lizards are “sit-and-wait” predators, usually attacking prey (insects and other arthropods) spied from a favorite perch. They detect food primarily by sight and recognize only live, moving prey.

In winter, fence lizards hibernate in logs, stumps, rock crevices or other sheltered areas but may sometimes emerge on warm days to bask.

Human Interactions

Fence lizards are frequently encountered by virtually anyone spending much time outdoors. They are often seen in rural and suburban yards and on the sides of buildings. Some people fear these completely harmless lizards, believing them to be poisonous. Children may enjoy catching fence lizards, but they are not particularly easy to maintain in captivity and make less-than-ideal pets. They are best enjoyed in the wild, where they add life and personality to any woodland.



Eastern Fence Lizard (Photo: Judy Gallagher)

References

- Conant, Roger, and Joseph T. Collins. *A Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern and Central North America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1991).
- Martof, Bernard S., William M. Palmer, Joseph R. Bailey and Julian R. Harrison III. *Amphibians and Reptiles of the Carolinas and Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).
- Mitchell, Joseph C. *The Reptiles of Virginia* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).
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Credits

Written by Jeff Beane; updated by Deborah Robertson, Wake County Parks and Recreation, Jeff Hall, NCWRC. 2018

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Average Size

Length: 4 to 7 inches. Females average slightly larger than males

Food

Mostly live insects and other arthropods

Breeding/Young

Most mating apparently takes place in spring. Males defend breeding territories against rivals. In late spring or summer, a female lays from five to 16 leathery-shelled eggs in a nest excavated in the soil or in damp sawdust or similar substrate. Hatching occurs in late summer or early fall, without further parental care. Usually only one clutch of eggs is laid each year, but some females may be able to produce two clutches in an extended season. Young are 1½ to 2¼ inches in length and resemble miniature adult females, but slightly darker and duller. They are independent upon hatching.

Life Expectancy

Unknown. Probably several years.



Juvenile Eastern Fence Lizard (Photo: Jodie Owen)