

Blue-Tailed Lizards— Skinks or Scorpions?

By Frederick Boyce

Almost anyone who lives in the southeastern U.S. will be familiar with certain fast-moving, shiny black lizards with five longitudinal golden-yellow stripes and bright blue tails. They are often seen sunning themselves on decks, walkways, fences and the foundations of buildings—and quickly disappear under cover if approached too closely.

When not alarmed, they move with a peculiar herky-jerky gait that brings to mind the stop-motion dinosaurs of the old movies. They are fascinating to observe, especially when stalking a tasty insect or spider, and will lash their blue tails back and forth like cats. They are properly known as skinks, more specifically, five-lined skinks, but I can remember hearing some of my country relatives back in the day referring to them rather fearfully as “scorpions.”

Of course, skinks are lizards—reptiles—and are nothing like true scorpions, the eight-legged arachnids (spider relatives) with venomous stingers in their long, segmented tails and paired claws like terrestrial crayfish. It is interesting, however, that, in nature, bright colors, such as the bright blue of the skink's tail, often do signify that an animal is venomous, toxic or at least noxious in some way, so perhaps it is not surprising that people might have assumed the brightly colored and conspicuous skinks to be dangerous.

It so happens that skinks can readily drop those bright blue tails if threatened by, say, a housecat, and the twitching tail will beguile the would-be predator while the skink scurries away to safety. There have been many reports of housecats acting very strangely, as if intoxicated, after ingesting skink tails. This ability to lose a tail or other body part, usually in order to escape predation, is a hallmark of many lizards and is known as *autotomy* (self-amputation). The tail regenerates, but the replacement is never quite as fine as the original, and can even grow back with a fork in some cases.

Skinks belong to a large and globally distributed family of lizards known as the Scincidae. Skinks are typically elongated in shape with limbs that seem proportionally small, and in some cases are greatly reduced or even absent altogether. As a rule, their heads are pointed in shape and covered in large plates rather than small scales. The body scales are small and do not overlap, making skinks appear to be smooth and highly polished.

The largest skinks live in the Indo-Pacific region. They include the blue-tongues of Australia and New Guinea, the bizarre Australian shingleback, and the weirdly intelligent monkey-tailed skinks of the Solomon Islands, which live in family groups like primates and raise only one large offspring at a time, which is born alive and remains with its parents for as long as a year. Blue-tongue skinks can grow to be nearly two feet in length and are easy to feed and care for and remarkably personable—traits that have made them very popular reptile pets.

There are five species of skink native to North Carolina, including the tiny ground skink (or little brown skink), which is our smallest reptile, with a head-body length of just a little over two inches. These little lizards are common in the Coastal Plain and are often heard more than seen as they scamper away through dry leaves or grass. They are solid coppery-brown on top, with broad, very dark brown stripes down either side.

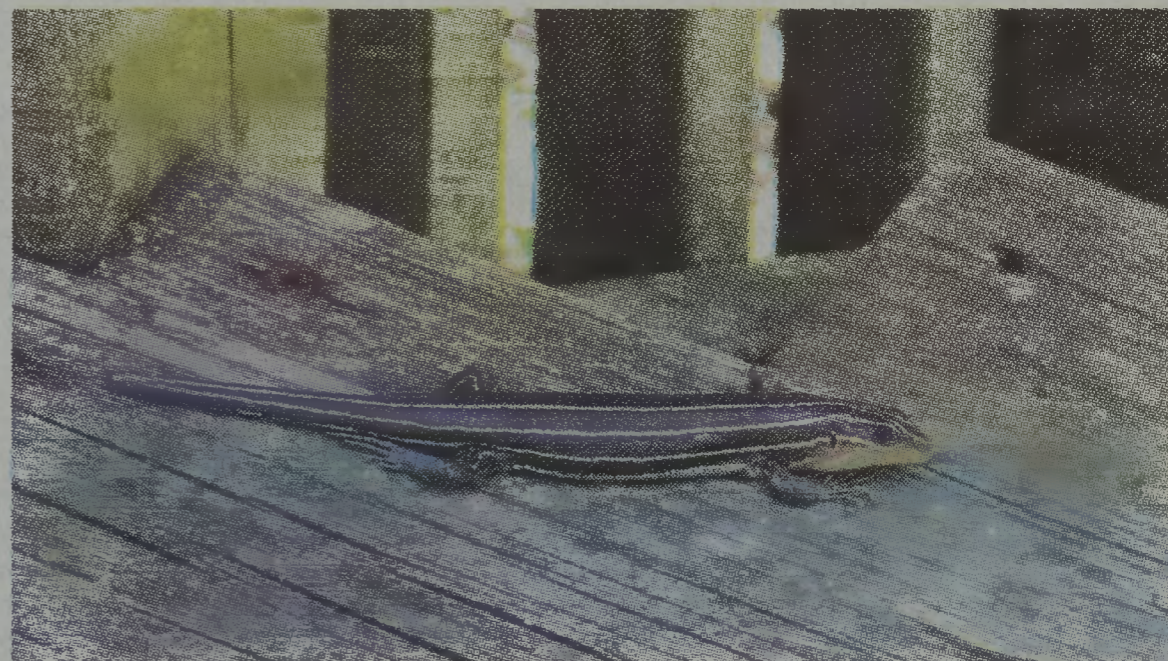
Coal skinks are found only in small, isolated populations in the southern mountains and do not occur in our area. By far, the most commonly seen are the five-lined skinks, and there are three species, all of which are similarly colored. Two of them, the five-lined skink (*Plestiodon fasciatus*) and the Southeastern five-lined skink (*Plestiodon inexpectatus*) are both medium-sized lizards that are so similar in appearance as to be difficult, if not impossible, for anyone but an expert to distinguish. The Southeastern five-lined skink, however, is the only one of the three found on the Outer Banks (including Bogue Banks), and is generally much more

common in the Coastal Plain than the five-lined skink, which is more often seen in the Piedmont.

The third and largest of the five-lined skinks is the very impressive broad-headed skink (*Plestiodon laticeps*), which can grow to be a little over a foot long and is the second-largest skink in North America, exceeded in size only by the massive Great Plains skink of the Midwest. Broad-headed skinks are also the most arboreal of the group and will readily scamper high up the trunks of pine trees to escape danger. A large specimen doing this can easily be mistaken for a squirrel. All three of the five-lined skinks are sexually dimorphic, meaning that adult males and females can be easily distinguished by sight. Whereas hatchling and juvenile skinks are brightly colored and even appear to have been freshly painted with acrylics, the bright golden stripes and blue tails gradually fade as they reach adulthood. Adult females will retain traces of the stripes and sometimes a bit of blue tinge in the tail, but adult males become a solid bronze color all over except for the head, which becomes a ruddy reddish-orange color, and is particularly bright during the spring breeding season when the territorial males will battle viciously with each other.

Sources consulted in writing this article: *Reptiles of North Carolina* by Palmer and Braswell and *Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern/Central North America* by Conant and Collins.

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A female Southeastern five-lined skink relaxes on the deck.—Photos by Fred Boyce



Male five-lined skinks battling for dominance.