

What is a Skink? by Sally Cureton

Skinks are active little lizards about 5-8 inches long. They like to burrow under decaying logs, stones or other debris making a moist, wooded habitat with plenty of cover just to their liking. They are shiny, smooth and very quick - and therefore hard to catch. Most of them will try to bite if captured and can actually give a substantial nip. Skinks have the unique ability to regrow their tails, which can break off easily. The new tail will look a bit different from the original and will never be quite as long. A Skink's body is slender with short legs and with has feet with five-toes. Most are diurnal, i.e., active during the daytime and quiet at night. The skink family is a large one and these critters are found on all continents.

One Skink that is very common throughout the eastern United States is known as the Five-lined Skink (*Eumeces fasciatus*.) You probably have them in your yard and you may have seen them basking in the sun on a warm summer day. It will grow to be 5 - 8 ½ inches long. Five-lined skinks that have just hatched will have five white or light yellow strips down their black backs. Their tails are a bright, almost neon, blue. As they age, the tail fades to a light blue and the stripes may slowly disappear. They look like small snakes as they slide over the ground since they move their bodies in a serpentine manner. They live on a wide variety of insects and spiders.

Five-lined Skinks emerge from a winter dormancy each year in the spring and immediately begin to breed. At that time, the male will develop an orange color on the snout. The female digs a nest under a log or rock and lays a dozen or so eggs. She then guards it until the eggs hatch in about 24-55 days, depending on the temperature. The new hatchlings are about 2 inches long. The average Skink will live for 5 - 6 years. There are two other closely related species of skinks that can be almost impossible to distinguish from a Five-lined Skink. They are the Broadhead Skink and the Southeastern Five-lined Skink. Even experts can have great difficulties telling these three species apart. However, by far the most common of the three is the Five-lined, so generally it is safe to assume that is what you have found. Now if you could just find one!