



INCREDIBLE SPECIES

NEWSLETTER



What's a Skink?

If you think a skink is a type of skunk, you're wrong! A skink is actually a lizard and in eastern Canada we have only one type of lizard – the **five-lined skink**. Since we have only one kind we'd really like to make sure it sticks around, but right now these little lizards are at risk of disappearing from Ontario.

Where Have All the Skinks Gone?

The main reason they've been disappearing is because of the loss of their habitat due to land development. Sometimes they get hit by cars when they try to cross the road. In addition to that, they're an interesting target for raccoons, dogs and cats to chase because they move so quickly. This cute little critter is also hunted by **pet poachers**. Poachers sell them illegally, as pets. We humans make life pretty tough for some creatures!



A five-lined skink basks in the sun

Photo: Jean Clifford

The Secretive Skink

A five-lined skink isn't easy to spot. It's one of the fastest reptiles in the world and if it sees you it will dart quickly out of sight. Skinks love to hide under leafy and woody debris in the forest or duck into small rock crevices. If you managed to grab one it would give you a sharp nip with its little teeth. When a skink comes out of hiding it loves to bask in the sun.

The five-lined skink's most amazing feature is its replaceable tail! If a predator tries to grab a skink by the tail it will break off easily and keep wiggling to distract its enemy. Another shorter tail will grow back.



Daddy Long Legs Eating a Skink Tail

Photo: Tim McCormack

Get the Facts

Five-lined Skink

Scientific Name: Eumeces fasciatus

Average life span: Up to 6 years

Average Length: 12 – 20 cm (5 – 8 in)

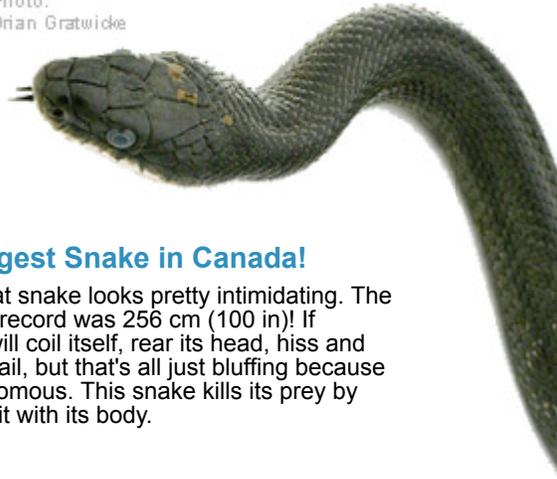
Appearance: Smooth, shiny scales. Juveniles are blackish with five cream-coloured stripes and a bright blue tail. Adults turn bronze with faded stripes and tail. To attract females the jaw of the males turns orange during breeding.

Breeding: Female lays 6 – 10 eggs in May or June. She guards the eggs until they hatch in July or August.

Food: Mostly insects. Larger adults can eat small mice and frogs.

Habitat: Wooded, sandy or rocky areas. Skinks hibernate below the frost line in winter.

Photo:
Brian Gratwicke



The Longest Snake in Canada!

The gray rat snake looks pretty intimidating. The longest on record was 256 cm (100 in)! If startled it will coil itself, rear its head, hiss and vibrate its tail, but that's all just bluffing because it's not venomous. This snake kills its prey by squeezing it with its body.

Threats to the Gray Rat Snake

Unfortunately, the gray rat snake is often persecuted by humans who don't understand that it's harmless. It is frequently run over by cars, either deliberately or accidentally, and its habitat is being destroyed by development. It is now classified as a "threatened" species in Ontario. Once people learn about these harmless snakes they realize there's no need to be frightened.



Photo: Jennifer Aitkens

Give a Snake a Brake!

Unfortunately, snakes like to bask in the sun on the road. It's easy to miss one because it can look like a branch or a piece of tire. If you're driving in snake territory, go slowly and watch out for snakes.

Nesting

Researchers have been monitoring snake populations by tracking them with implanted radio transmitters. They discovered that the snakes like making their nests in cottagers' compost piles. The Leeds County Stewardship Council built artificial nest boxes using compost and leaves and asked landowners to help with the recovery efforts by keeping nest locations safe. The artificial nests are constructed so predators, such as skunks and raccoons, can't steal the eggs. Read about this project [here](#).

Hibernation

The radio transmitters also helped researchers learn how these snakes hibernate for seven months during the winter. They discovered they snuggle together, away from the frost, in underground shelters called **hibernacula**. Between 30 and 60 snakes can be found inside each one!

Shedding Skin

A gray rat snake's skin doesn't stretch so it must be shed to permit growth. The shedding process causes impaired vision temporarily so the snake hides itself away in a spot safe from predators. It then rubs its nose against a rock and crawls out of its old skin, turning it inside out. A fresh new skin lives underneath. The snake sheds its skin about four times every year.

Get the Facts

Gray Rat Snake

(formerly Eastern or Black Rat Snake)

Scientific Name: *Pantherophis spiloides*

Average Length: 150 - 180 cm (60 - 70 in). The largest longest snake in Canada!

Average Life Span: 25 - 30 years

Appearance: Juveniles have blotchy markings which darken with age. Adults become blackish with a lighter chins.

Breeding: In early July, females lay about 12-16 eggs in damp locations such as rotting logs or compost piles. Eggs hatch in the fall. Females reproduce every second year.

Food: Usually eats mice and rats. The rat snake squeezes its prey until breathing stops.

Habitat: Found in two areas of Ontario: north shore of Lake Erie and eastern end of Lake Ontario. They prefer wooded areas and clear areas around the wood's edge. They love to climb trees. Rat snakes hibernate underground in winter in communal **hibernacula** (underground shelters).



Photo: Jeff Ward

To learn more about species "at risk" in Ontario, check out the [MNR website](#).

Learn All About Gray Rat Snake Conservation in Ontario

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhm2BFFGM8c>



Go to <http://www.incredibleworld.ca> to find out more about amazing species and their habitats.

