



UNIVERSITY OF
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IFAS EXTENSION

Reptiles of Southern Florida ¹

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Reptiles are an important and beneficial segment of the wildlife population found in urban areas. Though people are taught through movies, legends, and folklore to fear these animals, they pose little real threat to humans. Much of this fear comes from a lack of understanding and knowledge of reptiles.

Basics

Reptiles are cold-blooded animals, meaning that they do not maintain their own body heat, but must absorb heat from their surroundings. Actually, "cold-blooded" is a misnomer: since reptilian body temperature is dependent on environmental heat sources, in certain climates their body temperatures could exceed those of mammals and birds. Table 1.

Reptiles have a relatively waterproof skin composed of scales, which retains most of their body moisture. Because of these characteristics, reptiles are able to survive in harsh conditions. Many reptiles can be found in urban areas, and the following provides a list of reptiles that inhabit the part of Florida from Lake Okeechobee southward.

Crocodiles and alligators are native to southern Florida--they live in both freshwater and marine

aquatic environments. Crocodiles tend to be shy and reclusive, easily disturbed by human activity, which may account for their endangered species status. Alligators have adjusted more to humans, and tend to be more aggressive. Alligators dig dens, or "gator holes", that in the dry season may be the only sources of standing water, available to fish, insects, crustaceans, snakes, turtles, birds, and other animals.

Encounters with crocodiles and alligators occur because more and more of their native habitat is being developed or used for recreational activities.

Turtles are found in all habitats of South Florida: freshwater, marine, and terrestrial. Freshwater turtles can be divided into four groups:

- bottom-walking,
- basking,
- softshell, and
- box turtles.

Of the seven species of sea turtles in the world, five can be found in the coastal waters of South Florida.

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Tortoises are land-dwelling species, and of the four that can be found in North America, only the Gopher Tortoise inhabits South Florida. See Table 2.

Lizards are the group of reptiles with the greatest variety. Most lizards feed on insects and other small invertebrates. See Table 3.

Iguanas, however, tend to be vegetarians.

Some lizards have chameleon-like abilities, though there are no true chameleons native to the United States. This ability to change colors aids the lizard in camouflaging itself from both predator and prey, and is very important in social communication. Color changes can also be an indication of motivational state and status. Anoles can change color, though this ability depends on sunlight or heat. At low temperatures, anoles remain dark; but after sunning, they can turn a light green.

Many of the lizards found in South Florida are not native to this area, and are usually released pets or escapees from the pet trade.

Most skinks are insectivores (insect eaters). Larger skinks prey on small mammals or other reptiles. Lizards have developed an unusual defense mechanism with their "disposable" tails. When trying to capture a fleeing lizard, a predator will often grab the lizard's tail. The tail will snap off, distracting the predator, while the lizard escapes. The tail eventually grows back, but is no longer bone--just cartilage.

Snakes account for the greatest number of reptilian species inhabiting South Florida, and can be found in all of Florida's habitats. Snakes are beneficial to the environment because they control rodent and insect populations. Quiet, relatively inactive creatures, snakes are often seen in urban areas: on sidewalks, driveways and roadways--or any suitable concrete structure that has warmed in the sun. See Table 4.

Snakes have a Jacobson's organ located in the roof of their mouths. This unique organ receives information gathered by the snake when it sticks out its forked tongue and licks gaseous particles from the air. Jacobson's organ augments the snake's sense of smell, poor hearing, and reasonably good eyesight--and helps it survive.

The snake's worst enemy is human beings, who eliminate snakes through habitat division and destruction, through fear and ignorance. Many people kill snakes only to have them identified--too late--as harmless.

We humans need to understand that we have a greater chance of dying from a lightning strike than dying from a snakebite.

Table 1.

Table 1. Order <i>Crocodylia</i>: Alligators and Crocodiles		
Family	Common Name	Scientific Name
Crocodylidae	American Crocodile	<i>Crocodylus acutus</i>
Alligatoridae	American Alligator Caiman*	<i>Alligator mississippiensis</i> <i>Caiman crocodilus</i>

Table 2.

Table 2. Order <i>Testudinata</i>: Turtles, Tortoises, and Terrapins		
Family	Common Name	Scientific Name
Chelydridae	Florida Snapping Turtle	<i>Chelydra serpentina osceola</i>
Kinosternidae	Striped Mud Turtle	<i>Kinosternon baurii</i>
	Florida Mud Turtle	<i>Kinosternon subrubrum steindachneri</i>
	Stinkpot (Musk Turtle)	<i>Sternotherus odoratus</i>
Emydidae	Florida Chicken Turtle	<i>Deirochelys reticularia chrysea</i>
	Ornate Diamondback Terrapin	<i>Malaclemys terrapin macrospilota</i>
	Mangrove Terrapin	<i>Malaclemys terrapin rhizophorarum</i>
	Florida East Coast Terrapin	<i>Malaclemys terrapin tequesta</i>
	Peninsula Cooter	<i>Pseudemys floridana peninsularis</i>
	Florida Redbelly Turtle	<i>Pseudemys nelsoni</i>
	Florida Box Turtle	<i>Terrapene carolina bauri</i>
Testudinidae	Gopher Tortoise	<i>Gopherus polyphemus</i>
Cheloniidae	Atlantic Green Sea Turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas mydas</i>
	Atlantic Hawksbill Sea Turtle	<i>Eretmochelys imbricata imbricata</i>
	Loggerhead Sea Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta caretta</i>
	Atlantic Ridley Sea Turtle	<i>Lepidochelys kempfi</i>
Dermodochelyidae	Atlantic Leatherback Sea Turtle	<i>Dermodochelys coriacea coriacea</i>
Trionychidae	Florida Softshell	<i>Apalone ferox</i>

Table 3.

Table 3. Order <i>Squamata</i> - Suborder <i>Sauria</i>: Lizards, Geckos, Skinks, and Snakes		
Family	Common Name	Scientific Name

Table 3.

Iguanidae	Basilisk	<i>Basiliscus vittatus</i>
	Green Anole	<i>Anolis carolinensis</i>
	Green Bark Anole*	<i>Anolis distichus dominicensis</i>
	Florida Bark Anole*	<i>Anolis distichus floridanus</i>
	Cuban Brown Anole*	<i>Anolis sagrei sagrei</i>
	Bahaman Brown Anole*	<i>Anolis sagrei ordinatus</i>
	Large-headed Anole*	<i>Anolis cybotes</i>
	Knight Anole*	<i>Anolis equestris</i>
	Crested Anole*	<i>Anolis cristatellus</i>
	Hispaniolan Green Anole*	<i>Anolis chlorocyanus</i>
	Jamaican Anole*	<i>Anolis garmani</i>
	Northern Curly-tailed Lizard*	<i>Leiocephalus carinatus</i>
	Hispaniolan Curly-tailed Lizard*	<i>Leiocephalus schreibersi</i>
	Florida Scrub Lizard	<i>Sceloporus woodi</i>
	Green Iguana*	<i>Iguana iguana</i>
	Ctenosaur*	<i>Ctenosaura pectinata</i>
Gekkonidae	Reef Gecko*	<i>Sphaerodactylus notatus notatus</i>
	Ashy Gecko*	<i>Sphaerodactylus elegans</i>
	Ocellated Gecko*	<i>Sphaerodactylus argus</i>
	Indo-Pacific Gecko*	<i>Hemidactylus garnotii</i>
	Tropical House Gecko*	<i>Hemidactylus mabouia</i>
	Mediterranean Gecko*	<i>Hemidactylus turcicus</i>
	Yellow-headed Gecko*	<i>Gonatodes albogularis</i>
	Tokay Gecko*	<i>Gekko gekko</i>
Teiidae	Six-lined Racerunner	<i>Cnemidophorus sexlineatus sexlineatus</i>
	Ameiva*	<i>Ameiva ameiva</i>
Scincidae	Florida Keys Mole Skink	<i>Eumeces egregius egregius</i>
	Peninsula Mole Skink	<i>Eumeces egregius onocrepis</i>
	Southeastern Five-lined Skink	<i>Eumeces inexpectatus</i>
	Ground Skink	<i>Scincella lateralis</i>
Anguidae	Eastern Glass Lizard	<i>Ophisaurus ventralis</i>
	Island Glass Lizard	<i>Ophisaurus compressus</i>
	Eastern Slender Glass Lizard**	<i>Ophisaurus attenuatus longicaudus</i>
*Denotes introduced species. **Denotes species whose occurrence is questionable or incidental		

Table 4.

Table 4. Order <i>Squamata</i> - Suborder <i>Serpentes</i>		
Family	Common Name	Scientific Name

Table 4.

Colubridae	Florida Green Water Snake	<i>Nerodia floridana</i>
	Brown Water Snake	<i>Nerodia taxispilota</i>
	Florida Banded Water Snake	<i>Nerodia fasciata pictiventris</i>
	Mangrove Salt Marsh Snake	<i>Nerodia clarkii compressicauda</i>
	South Florida Swamp Snake	<i>Seminatrix pygaea cyclas</i>
	Florida Brown Snake	<i>Storeria dekayi victa</i>
	Eastern Garter Snake	<i>Thamnophis sirtalis sirtalis</i>
	Peninsula Ribbon Snake	<i>Thamnophis sauritus sacjebuu</i>
	Striped Crayfish Snake	<i>Regina alleni</i>
	Eastern Hognose Snake	<i>Heterodon platirhinus</i>
	Pine Woods Snake	<i>Rhadinea flavilata</i>
	Southern Ringneck Snake	<i>Diadophis punctatus punctatus</i>
	Key Ringneck Snake	<i>Diadophis punctatus acricus</i>
	Eastern Mud Snake	<i>Farancia abacura abacura</i>
	Everglades Racer	<i>Coluber constrictor paludicola</i>
	Southern Black Racer	<i>Coluber constrictor priapus</i>
	Eastern Coachwhip	<i>Masticophis flagellum flagellum</i>
	Rough Green Snake	<i>Opheodrys aestivus</i>
	Eastern Indigo Snake	<i>Drymarchon corais couperi</i>
	Corn Snake	<i>Elaphe guttata guttata</i>
	Yellow Rat Snake	<i>Elaphe obsoleta quadrivittata</i>
	Everglades Rat Snake	<i>Elaphe obsoleta rossalleni</i>
	Florida Pine Snake	<i>Pituophis melanoleucus mugitus</i>
	Florida Kingsnake	<i>Lampropeltis getulus floridana</i>
	Scarlet Kingsnake	<i>Lampropeltis triangulum elapsoides</i>
	Florida Scarlet Snake	<i>Cemphora coccinea coccinea</i>
	Coastal Dunes Crowned Snake	<i>Tantilla relicta pamlica</i>
	Peninsular Crowned Snake	<i>Tantilla relicta relicta</i>
	Rim Rock Crowned Snake	<i>Tantilla oolitica</i>
	Brahminy Blind Snake*	<i>Ramphotyphlops bramina</i>
	Elapidae	Eastern Coral Snake
Viperidae	Florida Cottonmouth	<i>Agkistrodon piscivorous conanti</i>
	Dusky Pygmy Rattlesnake	<i>Sistrurus miliarius barbouri</i>
	Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake	<i>Crotalus adamanteus</i>
*Denotes introduced species. **Denotes species whose occurrence is questionable or incidental		