

Legless Lizard



I remember the scene like it was yesterday, even though it was over 25 years ago. One of my friends and I were exploring a vacant lot in our neighborhood when we noticed what we thought was a plastic toy snake lying in the tall grass. The animal was like no snake we had ever seen. The body was a funny shape for a snake, and the head was peculiar. After we mustered up the nerve to capture the serpent, we were horrified to find that we had broken it in half. Two large segments of reptile wiggled in my hands. After careful consultation of our field guide, we realized that it was not a snake at all — we had broken the tail off of a legless lizard.

Most of the lizards found in the Southeast aren't very showy. Let's face it. We don't have 10-foot Komodo dragons here. We do have, however, a diversity of really neat smaller lizards. One such group is the glass lizards or legless lizards. They are large lizards with ear openings and eyelids but no appendages! Glass lizards also have a very long tail with "fracture planes." Fracture planes are weaknesses in the tail that allow it to break off in one of many different spots. If a predator grabs the lizard's tail, the body of the lizard, which contains all the vital organs, may escape while the tail wiggles wildly. In time, the lizard will regenerate a new tail. Many of the legless lizards we capture during our research on reptiles at the Savannah River Ecology Lab have broken or regenerated tails, indicating that they successfully avoided becoming a meal for someone else.

Glass lizards can be found in vacant lots, sparse wooded areas, or many other sandy habitats. Glass lizards are adept burrowers, so they are rarely seen above ground. On sunny mornings, especially after heavy rains, these lizards can be located as they bask in the sun or forage for insects. Glass lizards feed on a variety of invertebrates, including spiders and grasshoppers. In the summer, female legless lizards lay 5-12 eggs under rotten logs or in underground mammal burrows. Females often stay with the eggs until they hatch about two months later. The hatchlings, which are miniature replicas of the adults, grow to 2-3 feet in about two years.



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