



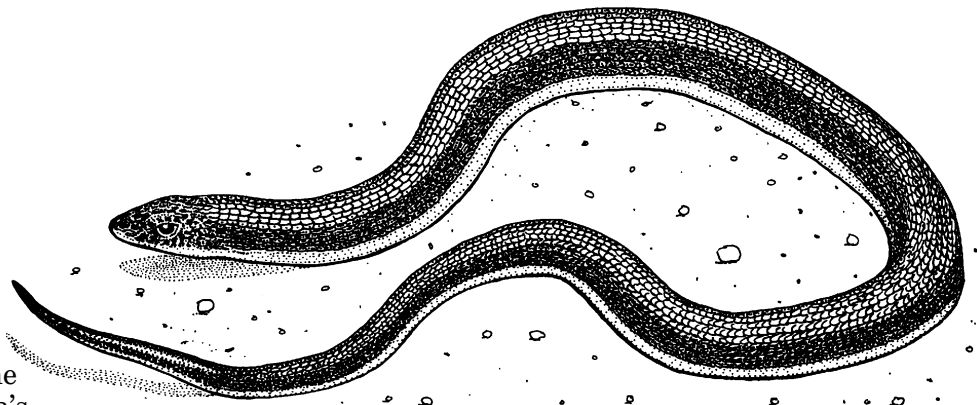
## Eastern Glass Lizard

*Ophisaurus ventralis*

The eastern glass lizard is the most common of North Carolina's three glass lizard species. These lizards are legless, superficially resembling snakes (the generic name *Ophisaurus* means "snake lizard"), but they are easily identified as lizards by the presence of external ear openings, moveable eyelids, small scales (rather than large, transverse scutes) on the belly, and a distinct groove or fold along the lower side of the body.

Glass lizards are so named because their tails, which account for over two-thirds of the animal's total length, are easily broken. It is uncommon to encounter adults with perfect tails. If a predator seizes a glass lizard by its tail, fracture planes in the caudal vertebrae cause the tail to snap off. The broken tail continues to move for several minutes, providing the predator with a distraction and a partial meal while the lizard makes its escape. This phenomenon, known as caudal autotomy, is a common defense mechanism among many lizard species.

If a glass lizard's tail is struck with a flat object, it may break into several pieces. A popular myth maintains that if this "snake" is cut into pieces, the pieces will reunite, hence the local name "joint snake." The only grain of truth in this story is that the lizard—if it survives—will eventually regenerate its tail, although the new tail will be much shorter and lighter in color than the original. This short, regenerated tail, present in most old adult lizards, has given rise



to such names as "horn snake" or "stinging snake" by people who mistake the pointed, regenerated tail tip for a poisonous stinger. This same myth is also applied to some snakes, especially the mud snake (*Farancia abacura*), which has a stout spine at the tip of its tail. Despite the persistence of this myth in rural folklore, no reptile has a stinger in its tail, and few animals are more harmless to humans than mud snakes and glass lizards.

### History and Status

The eastern glass lizard occurs throughout most of the North Carolina Coastal Plain, where it is locally common. Its range may once have extended farther into the Piedmont when longleaf pine forests covered more of the state. In North Carolina, the species is not currently listed under any category of special protection, though many local populations are threatened by development. In Virginia it is listed as threatened.

### Description

This glass lizard is quite variable in color and pattern, but most juveniles and young adults are shiny bronze, khaki, olive or brownish with one or more dark longitudinal stripes down each side of the back, and several white vertical bars along

the sides of the head and neck. The belly may be white or yellow. Adult females often retain this pattern, but old adult males usually become greenish with a uniform speckling of light and dark spots, no trace of stripes, a yellow belly and an ocher-colored regenerated tail tip.

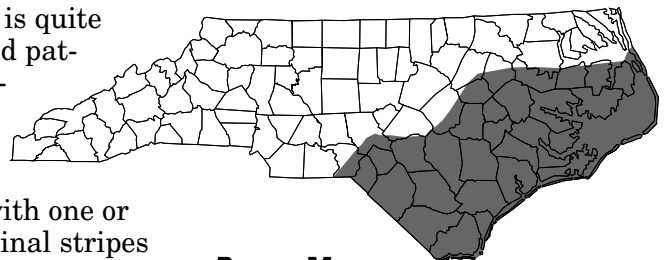
A glass lizard's scales are supported internally by bony plates known as osteoderms, and its body feels stiff and brittle to the touch, unlike the flexible body of a snake.

### Habitat and Habits

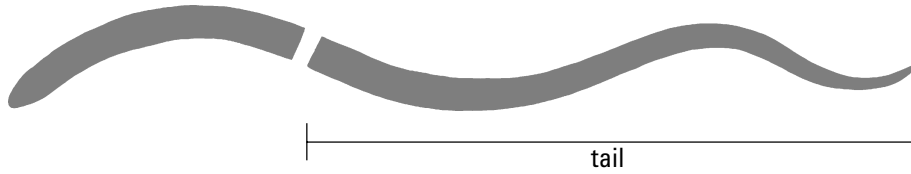
This lizard prefers pine flatwoods, maritime forests and other sandy habitats, and it is especially common in the open, grassy areas behind the dunes on some beaches, where it is often found under trash or other sheltering objects.

Although most active by day, specimens are sometimes found abroad at night, and especially at dusk. They are frequently encountered crossing roads.

Glass lizards feed on nearly



**Range Map:**  
Occupied range ■



any small animal they can catch and subdue with their strong jaws, but the mainstay of their diet is probably large insects. They hunt largely by sight, responding to moving prey, but may also use their tongue to identify dead or otherwise motionless food items at close range, in much the same fashion as a snake uses its tongue to detect prey.

In winter, glass lizards hibernate, usually in burrows below the frost line.

Predators of eastern glass lizards include snakes, hawks and carnivorous mammals.

## Range and Distribution

The eastern glass lizard ranges over most of the southeastern Coastal Plain, from extreme southeastern Virginia to south Florida, westward to southeastern Louisiana. In North Carolina it occurs throughout most of the Coastal Plain and is common in some areas, particularly on the Outer Banks.

## People Interactions

Glass lizards seldom interact with people. Infrequently encountered, they quickly retreat when disturbed and are often difficult to capture, especially without breaking the tail. Most persons who harbor an irrational fear of snakes also fear these completely harmless lizards, and a few persons who still believe in the "joint snake" or "stinging snake" myths regard them as very dangerous. Some glass lizards may attempt to bite if handled, and large specimens may inflict a pinch that could be considered painful, though

unlikely to break the skin. From an economic standpoint they are probably entirely beneficial, as they consume large numbers of insects.

These lizards tolerate some human activity, and may be common around rural dwellings, but they usually disappear from urban, suburban and other severely altered areas. Large numbers are killed on roads.

With proper care and minimal handling, glass lizards usually do fairly well in captivity and make interesting, though less than ideal, pets.

## References

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## Credits

Written by Jeff Beane.

Illustrated by J. T. Newman.

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## EASTERN GLASS LIZARD

### Classification

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

### Average Size

18 in. to 42 in., most of which is tail (head-body maximum 12 in.)

### Food

Mostly insects, spiders and other arthropods, earthworms, snails and small vertebrates.

### Breeding

Most mating takes place in spring. Females lay a single clutch of 5 to 17 white, leathery-shelled eggs in late spring or early summer under a log, pile of vegetation or other damp, sheltered spot, often remaining with the eggs until they hatch in late summer or early fall.

### Young

7 to 8 in. long, khaki-colored with one or more dark stripes along each side. Independent upon hatching.

### Life Expectancy

Captives have lived for 15 years; wild specimens are highly unlikely to survive that long.