



The Land Between

Cottage Country's Conservation Organization

www.thelandbetween.ca

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SKINK TALES

BIOLOGY AND CONSERVATION OF THE FIVE LINED SKINK



Skink Tales

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The Land Between is home to some of Canada's most iconic and beloved wildlife: loons, beavers, great blue herons, and ... lizards? While most of us tend to associate these small-bodied, cold-blooded reptiles with warmer climates, one lizard species, the five-lined skink, calls The Land Between home. It thrives in open granite rock outcrops that are typical of the southern Canadian Shield which comprise The Land Between. Given that the distribution of the five-lined skink in central Ontario is so closely associated with the distribution of The Land Between, the newsletter of The Land Between is certainly aptly named! Apart from a handful of isolated popula-



tions of the species in southwestern Ontario, The Land Between is the only place the five-lined skink calls home in Canada.

What makes a skink a skink? Skinks are very small, secretive, and speedy. Considering these traits, it is not surprising that they go unnoticed by many residents in The Land Between. True to their name, skinks have five cream-coloured stripes that run down their black body. This colour pattern is most evident in juveniles. Juveniles also have a striking feature that is hard to miss: an electric blue tail. As individuals age, their stripes and their blue tail fade, especially in males. In the breeding season (late spring), males develop orange colouration on their jaws and chin. Skinks have smooth scales, which give them a shiny appearance. This may explain why they are often mistaken for salamanders.

Skinks are fascinating animals and have some interesting and even surprising characteristics. For instance, contrary to most female reptiles, skinks display parental care to their eggs. These moms-to-be are excellent guardians of their clutch of eggs, and rarely leave the nest once the eggs are laid. They protect the eggs against predators such as raccoons, and even rotate the eggs within the nest to ensure their proper development. Another remarkable characteristic of skinks is their ability to lose and re-grow their tails. When harassed by a potential predator, skinks can drop their tail as a defence mechanism. When this occurs, the predator is left with a distracting, thrashing tail, and the skink is then able to attempt a speedy getaway to safety – minus its tail!



The five-lined skink has the largest geographic distribution of any lizard in eastern North America. It is found across the eastern U.S. and is considered to be common in much of the southern portion of its range. However, in Canada, the distribution of the species' extends only into the southern portion of Ontario, where the species is at its northern limit. Unfortunately for the skink, this area is also home to the largest concentration of humans in Ontario. The five-lined skink is considered to be at risk in Canada, and is threatened primarily by habitat loss and habitat degradation. Other threats to the species include the loss of microhabitat features (e.g. woody debris and cover rock), road mortality, and illegal collecting for the pet trade. Recently, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) determined that the populations in southwestern Ontario and those found on the Shield (in The Land Between) should be assessed and managed independently. As a result of this decision, skinks in southwestern Ontario are now listed as Endangered, while skinks along the southern Shield are listed as Special Concern.

For those of you who are fortunate enough to share the habitat of this little creature, the next time you think you have spied the flash of a bright blue tail quickly disappearing under a nearby rock, tread carefully ... you may have been given a rare opportunity to marvel at eastern Canada's only lizard species!

Supporting Skinks

- Leave cover rock and woody debris where they are, rather than clearing them from your property. Skinks need these cover items for shelter.
- Report any observations of five-lined skinks to the Natural Heritage Information Centre within the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources.

See http://nhic.mnr.gov.on.ca/nhic_cfm