

Conservation Corner

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Several weeks ago Scott County Conservation held their Annual Bald Eagle Days. In addition to the many eagles wintering along the Mississippi, another creature was also identified when a couple shared a photo of a lined snake they had discovered while mushroom hunting in Appanoose County last spring. Their naturalist correctly identified it as a slender glass lizard, one of Iowa's most fascinating reptiles and our first reptile friend of 2017.

Lizards, of course, are members of the reptile class of animals which arose over 300 million years ago. Over time reptiles came to dominate the world during the Age of the Dinosaurs. Despite extinction events that wiped out many of the reptiles, four orders have survived to the present day, including two here in Iowa. The Chelonia Order is represented by 13 species of turtles and the Squamata Order by 5 species of lizards and 27 species of snakes. Following the retreat of the glaciers, most of these creatures traveled by land or by rivers into Iowa where changing climate patterns scattered pockets of remnant populations across the state.

Iowa's lizards belong to three families which include three species of skinks, one racerunner or whiptail, and one legless lizard. That's right, slender glass lizards, members of the Anguillidae Family, lack limbs and are often mistaken for snakes. Unlike snakes, however, these long, slender lizards have movable eyelids, external ear openings, and lateral side grooves. Like most lizards, their tails are a large part of their bodies, approximately two-thirds of their length of 22-42 inches.

The slender glass lizard is named for its fragile tail that, when seized by a predator, shatters into moving pieces. The lizard quickly regrows a new, albeit shorter, tail. Alas, there's no truth to the myth that these pieces somehow reattach themselves or grow into new lizards. Another handy feature is their lateral grooves or folds of skin that permit expansion of their bodies when breathing, after a large meal, or when carrying eggs. Sounds like a good plan.

These lizards use their excellent color vision and sense of smell to locate prey such as crickets, grasshoppers, beetles, spiders, caterpillars, and snails which they mash with their strong jaws before swallowing them whole.

Slender glass lizards breed in May. Females coil around the 5 to 17 eggs, which are laid in June and July, until they hatch in August or September. Then the hatchlings, juveniles, and adults all eat like crazy to accumulate fat for the winter hibernation that runs from October until April.

Slender glass lizards use their brown and tan striped coloration as camouflage, but if spotted may flee with amazing speed. They have been reported in 12 south central and southeastern counties where they lead secretive lives in open grassland and oak savannas. Unfortunately, loss of habitat and pesticide use have impacted slender glass lizard populations here in Iowa where they are now classified as threatened. We trust Iowans will respond and this unique reptile will continue to call the Hawkeye State home.

