

Prehensile-tailed Skink

Corucia zebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata (lizards & snakes)

Family: Scincidae (skinks)

Other names: giant skink, Solomon Island skink, monkey-tail skink, Solomon Island prehensile-tailed skink, Solomon Island green tree skink

Other subspecies: *Corucia* has traditionally been considered monotypic, with its single species represented by two geographically separated subspecies, *C. z. zebrata* to the east and *C. z. alfredschmidti* to the west [1]

Other Relatives: *C. zebrata* is the sister lineage to the remainder of the group *Egernia*, a largely Australian lineage of skinks [1]



Zoo Skinks 2.1.0

'Dr. Spaceman' 0.1 –female

Birth: 10/09/2007 AQ: 04/30/2015 630 g

About Dr. Spaceman

Dr. Spaceman was born at the Detroit Zoo, then transferred to the Birmingham Zoo in 2010 before coming to Brandywine.

'Susan Junior' AKA 'SJ' 1.0 –male

Program Animal

Birth: 05/26/2011 AQ: 04/30/2015 528g

About SJ

SJ was born at the Birmingham Zoo.

'Denver' 1.0 –male

Birth: 03/11/2013 AQ: 04/30/2015 575g

About Denver

Denver was born at the Birmingham Zoo.



Status

Not evaluated; CITES: Appendix II

Although the conservation status for *C. zebrata* is unknown, the species' forest habitat is under threat, due to forest fragmentation and destruction as a result of intense logging [1]

Geographic Region

Solomon Islands, located northeast of Australia

Habitat The prehensile-tailed skink is found in primary and secondary tropical forests [2]. It is often found in the strangler fig tree (*Ficus* sp.), a rainforest species [3].

Characteristics

Size: *weight:* 14-28 ounces [2], up to 35 oz(Hagen et al., 2012)

length: 32 inches from the snout to the tip of the tail [2]

Longevity: **Wild** unknown **Captivity** ~15 years [2]

Physical Description

- The prehensile-tailed skink is the largest of the known skinks [2]
- The body is olive to green in color, with scattered black scales on the back and legs, helping to camouflage it from enemies. [2]. Their disruptive color patterns and slow movements help the skink go unnoticed [4].
- Like other skinks, its head is flat and triangular.
- It has thick, strong, short legs and sharp claws that help it climb trees.
- The skin of this skink is smoother and shinier than others, and the scales are smooth, flat, and overlapping. [2]
- Their tails are **prehensile**, meaning that they can curl them around objects such as branches and hold onto them for balance [2]. Their tails make up nearly half of their body length [3]. Unlike some lizards, it does not have the ability to lose and **regenerate** if its tail should break off when caught by predators. [2]

Dimorphism

Males: male skink having a broader head and a more slender body shape than the female [5].

Females:

Diet: Herbivore

Diet in the Wild: They feed on flowers, leaves, fruits and shoots. They are even able to eat quite toxic plants with no ill effects observed. [3]. Juvenile skinks often eat feces from adults to acquire the necessary microflora to digest their food [5].

Diet in the Zoo: reptile salad and fruits

Behavior

- *Crepuscular*, dawn and dusk & *Nocturnal*, night-active
- *Arboreal*, spends most of its time in the trees, using its prehensile tail for support and balance

Home Life

- Retreat to the high canopy rainforest during the day [5].
- Uses its sense of smell to identify its territory and other members of its group. Similar to snakes, they smell by flicking their tongue to gather scents and on retraction, touch the tongue to the opening of a Jacobson's organ on the mouth roof [5].

Social Structure and Communication

- Skinks are very territorial and live in a family or communal group referred to as a **circulus** [5].
- Solomon Island skinks are one of the few species of reptile that functions as a social family unit, with parents working together to defend their territory and their young [3].
- Adult female skinks will "adopt" orphaned young skinks ensuring their survival [5].
- When threatened, they will rear up on hind legs and hiss loudly, and can bite savagely [2] [6].

Reproduction

- *Viviparous matrotrophy*, live-bearing, but embryos receive nutrients transferred from the mother [7]
- Sexual maturity is reached at 2 years of age. [2]
- Copulation occurs during early evening in the trees and may last from 5-15 minutes. [2]
- The female produces eggs that hatch within her body and are nurtured there by a placental connection until, after about 6-8 months, a single baby (rarely 2 or even 3) is born. [5] [2] [3]
- The babies are huge in comparison to the adult. When born, a prehensile-tailed skink is about 1/2 the size of the adult (75 grams/2.5 oz and are usually 37 cm/14.5" long) [6] [5]
- The baby is **6-9 inches long** and stays with the mother for about 6 months after birth. The father and mother will defend the baby, a very unusual behavior for a reptile. [2] [6]
- Usually, at around one year of age, the young skink will leave its group to form a new family group [5].

Conservation

- **Use & Trade:** Most individuals used as pets are either young and captive bred or older and imported before the CITES sanctions were put into place. [2]
 - The species has been subject to poaching for the international pet market, a process that is believed to have put severe pressure on some populations [1]
- **Threats:** The Solomons are rapidly being deforested for lumber and agriculture. Destruction of habitat and depletion by the pet trade have greatly reduced this animal's chances for survival. [2]
 - Exportation of this species is illegal to protect the declining population. [2]
 - Low reproduction rates also lend this animal to being threatened [2]
- **Predators:** snakes and birds of prey.

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- This is the only skink that is completely herbivorous. [2]
- This is the only known species of skink with a prehensile, or grasping, tail. [2]
- They are called monkey tailed skinks because they use their long, agile tails to help move around in the tree canopy – a bit like monkeys [3]. This speckling can look like a zebra's stripes, hence its Latin name [3].

Glossary: List of definitions of the most important recurrent technical terms used in the text.

Ovoviviparous - a mode of reproduction in animals in which embryos develop inside eggs that are retained within the mother's body until they are ready to hatch.

Prehensile - (chiefly of an animal's limb or tail) capable of grasping.

Regenerate - (of a living organism) regrow (new tissue) to replace lost or injured tissue.

References

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- [2] Friends of the Rosamond Gifford Zoo Education Volunteers, "Prehensile Tailed Skink," 26 September 2005. [Online]. Available: <http://www.rosamondgiffordzoo.org/assets/uploads/animals/pdf/Prehensile-tailedSkink.pdf>. [Accessed March 2015].

- [3] Reptile Park, "Solomon Island skink," 2015. [Online]. Available: <http://www.reptilepark.com.au/animalprofile.asp?id=215>. [Accessed March 2015].
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