

## OBSERVATIONS ON THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE COMMON LIZARD (*LACERTA VIVIPARA*) IN SCOTLAND

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I saw my first Common Lizard (*Lacerta vivipara*) in the summer of 1940, a bronze-black baby of less than five centimetres long darting across rocks at the edge of Combe Martin beach. My only field guide at that time was the Observer's Book of British Animals, which had rather poor photographs of lizards, and until a visit to a museum in Ilfracombe, which had pickled animals in jars, enlightened me, I laboured under the delusion that immature bronze-coloured Common Lizards were adult *Lacerta vivipara*, and adult females were Sand Lizards (*Lacerta agilis*).

I continued to find Common Lizards in Devon, Wiltshire, Buckinghamshire, Sussex and the Isle of Wight, until my father was sent to Scotland in 1944, and we lived in rural Renfrewshire, which despite much likely-looking rough country, had no reptiles and very few common amphibians. I have been continuously resident in Scotland since that time, and I have only had two sightings of Common Lizards in lowland Scotland; one in Troon in Ayrshire in 1958, and one near Dunbarton in 1965. However soon after moving to Dundee in 1974, I went hill-walking in Perthshire, and was amazed to come upon several Common Lizards six hundred metres above sea-level, torpid with cold. Checking the distribution maps in Deryk Frazer's field guide "Reptiles and Amphibians in Britain", I realised that the Eastern Highlands, particularly the Angus Glens, had excellent populations of Common Lizards and Adders, many inhabiting particularly high altitudes.

In contrast the lizard populations of Lowland Scotland seem to be disappearing fast. Before 1959 there were several lizard sites around the coast of Fife and in 1983 lizards were found in two inland locations there as well. They are now hard to find in that county, despite the fact that there has been comparatively little disturbance of the coastal heathland where they used to be found. I have spent hours peering into what looks like ideal habitats and have found nothing. Presumably the answer lies in the chemicals used to treat the cornfields lying behind the littoral heathlands.

For the last few years I have been watching a population of lizards that live on the south facing bank of a path going through Glendoll Forest, roughly thirty miles north of Dundee. This is at the beginning of the so-called "Jock's Road", a tortuous scramble over the Grampians of Braemar, seventeen miles to the north. The habitat is a heathery, rocky strip with a ditch in front and Scots pines and beech trees behind, getting sufficient sunshine to provide ideal basking places. In summer this path is very popular with hikers, walkers with dogs, and even mothers with children. The lizards tend to be very wary; the fact that many sport renovated tails speaking for itself. Nevertheless this path, which is about three miles long, usually reveals something of interest. On very warm days the lizards do not appear until the sun has slipped behind the hills, when they bask in the gloom on the warmed rocks and pine logs. The average number seen in August on any one day is usually under half a dozen, mostly gravid females. I have observed three colour variations; the normal yellow and brown patterns with spots; a yellow and orange morph without spots which superficially resembles a *Psammodromus algirus*, and a greenish morph with a fine network of small black spots. I have not seen the completely unmarked light brown lizards in Glendoll which are frequently seen in others parts of the Scottish Highlands.

Unlike the animals found at higher altitudes, which do not often exceed ten centimetres in length, the Glendoll lizards look as large as their English counterparts, the luxuriant vegetation of the ditches providing a copious diet.

Reptiles are very local in Scotland; rare in the lowlands, and continue to become more scarce there, despite large tracts of very suitable habitat in under-populated country. Whilst they may be under-recorded, due to lack of interest on the part of Scottish nature lovers, who prefer eagles, ospreys and pine martins, there must also be other reasons for their apparent demise, providing areas of research which should be properly investigated.

Just as efforts are being made to re-introduce Sand Lizards to the coastal dunes of the West country, so the re-introduction of Common Lizards in Fife could be similarly rewarding. The huge forest of Tenstmuir, in the north-east of the county, approximately ten miles square, with the fastest developing dune system in Britain, would, in my opinion, be an ideal location.

### REFERENCES

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