

Common Five-lined Skink (*Plestiodon fasciatus*)

Family Scincidae

Subspecies: None currently recognized

Updated 2025



Juvenile, © Garret Adamek



Adult Female, © AnimalDiversity Web



Adult Male, © Kansas Herpetofaunal Atlas

Description/Identification: Common Five-lined Skinks are a relatively small, slender, somewhat elongated bodied lizard with very smooth, sleek, overlapping scales. These scales, which somewhat resemble a fish's scales, give Common Five-lined Skinks a shiny, or wet appearance to them. The head and neck are broad, with the neck being indistinct from the rest of the body. The four limbs are somewhat small and reduced, and there are two postlabial scales present on the head. One or two external, outer ear openings are present on each side of the head, and the head is also fairly short and somewhat shovel-like. Inside the mouth, Common Five-lined Skinks have a single upper and lower row of blunt, peg-like teeth along the upper and lower maxillae and quadrates, and only the tips of each tooth typically protrude from the mucous membrane.

Hatchling and juvenile Common Five-lined Skinks are similar to, but more boldly colored and patterned than the adults, having a black to dark brown ground color with five distinct, lightish yellow or white longitudinal stripes about one scale row wide running from the head and neck, onto the base of the tail. Their tails are often a bright metallic blue, which may be retained by adult females as a darker navy blue, but never in adult males. Ground color in adult Common Five-lined Skinks become more of a gray, brown, or grayish-brown, with lighter tan or brown, less distinct longitudinal stripes. The underside is usually a plain cream, white, or pale yellow color, but the blue coloration of the tails extends to the undersides of the tail as well. Regenerated tails tend to be more solid gray or brown in color.

The thicker reddish, or reddish brown darker lateral stripe may often be the most boldly marked or evident stripe in adult Common Five-lined Skinks. Some adult males can become nearly uniform gray or brown, with the stripes barely discernable. Adult females usually also retain more distinct stripes. During the breeding season in the spring, adult male Common Five-lined Skinks will also develop much broader heads and jaws than the females, and also develop bright, vibrant red, orange, or reddish-orange labials along the upper jaws, chins, throats, and anterior undersides of their bodies. Otherwise, Common Five-

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lined Skinks can be difficult to visually sex and differentiate from males and females, except for other very slight dimorphic characteristics. Adult males lose the metallic blue colors of the tail, becoming more of a gray instead.

Common Five-lined Skinks can be distinguished from Six-lined Racerunners (*Aspidoscelis sexlineatus*) by their much smoother, slender, sleek scalation, and from Northern prairies skinks (*Plestiodon septentrionalis*), which Common Five-lined Skinks can commonly be confused with, either by their range of occurrence, number of post-labial scales present (two in Common Five-lined Skinks, and only one in prairie skinks), and 5 uniform light stripes on a dark ground color in Common Five-lined Skinks, and 7 alternating light and dark stripes on prairie skinks.

Common Five-lined Skinks can also be distinguished by the “Y” shaped pattern where the stripes converge behind the head, whereas on the prairie skink, this is a more irregular lattice. Common Five-lined Skinks range in size from about 5.1 to about 8.5 inches in snout to tail (STL) length, or about 2.36 to 3.3 inches snout-to-vent length (SVL). No subspecies of the Common Five-lined Skink are currently recognized.



© WDNR.

Range and Distribution: Common Five-lined Skinks have a large and broad range, from the New England/Northeastern United States from New York, Vermont, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, throughout the eastern U.S., west to eastern Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. In Wisconsin, Common Five-lined Skinks usually occur in scattered, locally abundant pockets, or populations throughout the state, but most commonly in the west-central, central, and northeastern portions. Records of Common Five-lined Skinks from south-central and southeastern portions of Wisconsin are likely old or historical records, but may potentially still occur.

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Ventral/Belly View. © Unknown.

Habitat: Common Five-lined Skinks occur in moist, humid, sandy soiled forest edge habitats, as well as clearings and openings in oak barrens, pine barrens, dry northern or mixed hardwoods forests, and old woodlots with numerous stumps, logs, rocks, slabs, or other ground debris. Adjacent dikes, roadcuts, railroad grades, and other similar habitats also are common haunts for many Common Five-lined Skinks.

Feeding and Diet: Common Five-lined Skinks are primarily insectivorous, feeding on a wide variety of terrestrial insects and insect larvae, arachnids, mollusks such as small snails, crustaceans, and other arthropods or other types of invertebrates.

Natural History: Common Five-lined Skinks are one of four native lizard species in Wisconsin. They may emerge from their overwintering locations as early as late April or to mid-May, and are primarily diurnal, actively foraging and patrolling across the sand or the ground flicking their tongues continuously in search of food. The tongues, when flicked out, are a short, thick and only somewhat forked pinkish or reddish in color. When temperatures become too cold, or too warm and hot, Common Five-lined Skinks will retreat deeper into self-excavated burrows underneath rocks, logs, in stumps, or underneath other debris.

Common Five-lined Skinks may remain active throughout the year until September or October, where they will then overwinter deeper in these aforementioned self-excavated burrows underground, deep within, or under logs, rocks, or other piles of debris. They may overwinter singly, or together in small groups. Breeding takes place shortly after emergence in May, where the males will develop sexually dimorphic characteristics, including developing larger, broader heads, and red, orange, to reddish-orange coloration on the upper jaws and labials, chins, throats, and fore-parts of their undersides. Males during breeding will actively maintain a small territory, and will chase other males out. Although Common Five-lined Skinks are primarily terrestrial, they also may climb up onto low stumps, logs, or vegetation in order to bask and forage on occasion, but are wary and are thus seldom seen basking. They may also occasionally run up the sides of trees to forage for food or to escape predators in addition.

By mid-June or July, about 4 to 8, but as many as 13 large eggs are laid by the females in the same self-excavated sandy chambers underneath or within logs, rocks, railroad ties, or other ground debris, and are guarded by the females until they hatch, in about 40 to 50 days. Once hatched, newborn skinks fend

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for themselves on their own and receive no further parental care. Common Five-lined Skinks are quick and agile, and rely on their speed to evade predators first and foremost. When physically seized, or voluntarily, Common Five-lined Skinks can also drop all, or portions of their tails using specialized musculature and ligaments in their tails which create pressure points or breaking points when pushed against objects. Once detached, the tails writhe and wriggle for several minutes, long enough to distract a potential would be predator for the skink to escape.

A new tail will then usually regenerate and regrow over several weeks, but will never be as long or patterned as the original. Common Five-lined Skinks will also bite if seized; however their small mouths and tiny teeth very rarely draw blood, and are of little more consequence than a slight pinch to a human.

Natural predators of Common Five-lined Skinks can include many different species of birds (such as crows, kestrels, hawks, and other small birds of prey), snakes, and a number of different carnivorous or predatory mammals including domestic cats, foxes, skunks, shrews, raccoons, moles, and opossums.

Conservation Status: In Wisconsin, Common Five-lined Skinks are currently listed as “Common”. They are regulated and protected along with all other of Wisconsin’s herptiles, nonetheless under N.R. 16.. Common Five-lined Skinks are currently not protected or regulated federally. Common Five-lined Skinks are currently IUCN Red-List Least Concern (LC).