

Prairie Skink (*Plestiodon septentrionalis*)

Family Scincidae

Subspecies: Northern Prairie Skink (*Plestiodon septentrionalis septentrionalis*)

Updated 2025



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Description/Identification: The Prairie Skink is a relatively small, slender, somewhat elongated bodied lizard with very smooth, sleek, overlapping scales. These scales, which somewhat resemble a fish's scales, give Prairie 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 only one postlabial scale is 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, Prairie 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.

Prairie Skinks can be characterized as having a whitish, coppery-bronze, tan, or light gray ground color, with seven lighter colored longitudinal stripes along the body, alternating with six to eight darker longitudinal stripes. The widest, or thickest dark stripes along the sides are usually bordered above and below by lighter white stripes, and which may extend onto the tail. This widest dark stripe usually begins behind each eye, and may be broken up by the end of the tail in some individuals. On the back are four lighter stripes which run from the back of the head to the tip of the tail. The median two of these strips are often broken up or not as well-defined.

These alternating darker stripes can range in color from black, dark brown, or dark reddish-brown, and the limbs may be a darker gray, or similar in color to the rest of the body ground color. The ventral, or underside is usually a lighter colored, unmarked tan, white or cream colored, or light yellowish. Male and female Prairie Skinks can be difficult to sex or distinguish physically; however, the best and most reliable diagnostic distinguishing males are their reddish to orange, or reddish-orange coloration developed on their heads, jaws, and throats during the breeding season.

Hatchling, or juvenile Prairie Skinks are similar to the adults in appearance, but have darker blackish

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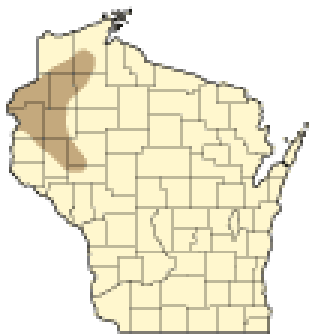
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ground colors, with 7 light longitudinal dorsal stripes, and a dull to vibrant blue colored tail. Adult females may retain a duller bluish tail, but this coloration is lost in adult males. Regenerated tails lost through predation attempts or defense are usually shorter, and lack any coloration or pattern. Prairie Skinks can be distinguished from Six-lined Racerunners (*Aspidoscelis sexlineatus*) by their much smoother, slender, sleek scalation, and from Common Five-lined Skinks (*Plestiodon fasciatus*), which Prairie 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. Prairie Skinks range in size from about 5.1 to about 9.0 inches in snout to tail (STL) length, or about 3.3 inches snout-to-vent length (SVL). The subspecies occurring in Wisconsin is the nominate form, the Northern Prairie Skink (*Plestiodon septentrionalis septentrionalis*).



© WDNR. Missing: Disjunct Population in Portage County, WI.

Range and Distribution: Prairie Skinks range from isolated portions of southern Saskatchewan, Canada, through Minnesota and the eastern edges of the Dakotas, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, and to extreme northwestern Missouri. The Southern Prairie Skink (*Plestiodon septentrionalis obtusirostris*) extends further south into southern Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Texas, and Louisiana. In Wisconsin, Prairie Skinks are found primarily in the Northwestern quarter of the state, although an isolated, introduced population continues to persist in Portage County, in central Wisconsin.



Ventral/Belly View. © Gary Nafais.

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Habitat: Prairie Skinks favor open, to semi-open sandy soiled habitats in pine barrens, old fields, bracken grasslands, oak savannahs, or sandy prairies or forest clearings. They frequently occupy sandy or rocky banks along roadcuts, creeks, rivers, or lakes, and where they do occur, they do so usually in high density. The introduced, disjunct population of central Wisconsin occupy habitat which can best be described as dikes or old railroad grades with rocky riprap along the Wisconsin River, adjacent to interspersed marshes, powerline cuts, and bottomland forest, which is not usually typical habitat for skinks.

Feeding and Diet: Prairie 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: Prairie 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, Prairie Skinks will retreat deeper into self-excavated burrows underneath rocks, logs, in stumps, or underneath other debris.

Prairie Skinks may remain active throughout the year until September or October, where they will then overwinter deeper in these aforementioned self-excavated burrows underground, or deep within or under rocks, logs, 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 the breeding season will maintain small territories, and will chase other males out. Although Prairie Skinks are primarily terrestrial, they also may climb up onto low stumps, logs, or vegetation in order to bask and forage on occasion.

By July, about 4 to 6, but as many as 13 large eggs are laid by the females in the same self-excavated sandy chambers, underneath rocks, logs, or other debris, and are guarded by the females until they hatch, in about 40 to 50 days. Once hatched, newborn skinks fend for themselves on their own and receive no further parental care. Prairie Skinks are quick and agile, and rely on their speed to evade predators first and foremost. When physically seized, or voluntarily, Prairie 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. Prairie 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.

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Natural predators of Prairie 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, Prairie Skinks are currently listed as a “Special Concern” Species. They are regulated and protected along with all other of Wisconsin’s herptiles, as a result under N.R. 16. Prairie Skinks are currently not protected or regulated federally. Prairie Skinks are currently IUCN Red-List Least Concern (LC).