

Six-lined Racerunner (*Aspidoscelis sexlineatus*)

Family Teiidae

Subspecies: Prairie Racerunner (*Aspidoscelis sexlineatus viridis*)

Updated 2025



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Description/Identification: The Six-lined, or Prairie Racerunner is a small teiid lizard species measuring in size from about 2.36 to 3.14 inches snout-to-vent length (SVL), or up to about 5.9 to 10.5 inches snout-to-tail length (STL). It is streamlined, with a broad, pointed head and snout, and the tail is long and slender, whorled with about four to six slightly enlarged rows of spiny scalation. The dorsal scales are dull, granulated, or pellet-like, and rough in texture to the touch, while the belly, or ventral scales are larger, flattened, smoothened, and square or rectangular in seven or eight straight rows. Inside the mouth, Prairie Racerunners 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.

As with most lizards, one to two external ear openings are present on each side of the head, and the feet, toes, and digits are enlarged and fringe-toed. The fourth toe from the inner digits on each of the hind feet are the longest and most jointed digits. The scales atop the head are also enlarged, smooth, and plate-like. Male and female Six-lined Racerunners are similar in physical appearance, and can be difficult to distinguish, except during the breeding season when males develop much more vibrant bright blue, teal or turquoise blue, or greenish-blue coloration on their labials and upper jaws, chins, throats, and undersides.

The scalation and ground color on the heads, limbs, and tail may range from a brown or dark brown, grayish, or grayish-brown, or olive-brown, with six distinct white, yellow or greenish-yellow longitudinal stripes running from about behind each eye and behind their heads, to about the anterior third portion of the tails, becoming unpatterned thereafter. Both sexes may have brighter greenish-yellow along the laterals or sides as well. Sometimes the stripes may be a pale bluish color as well. A subtle tan to light brown dorsal stripe in between stripes may also be present.

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On the ventral, or underside, females and juveniles may be a mostly plain grayish or whitish, while the undersides of adult males are usually tinged with blue. Hatchling and juvenile Six-lined Racerunners appear similar in pattern and coloration as the adults, but also have much brighter bluish or greenish-blue tails, which are lost into adulthood. Six-lined Racerunners can often be confused with Prairie Skinks (*Plestiodon septentrionalis*) or Common Five-lined Skinks (*Plestiodon fasciatus*), particular the brightly colored blue tails which juvenile Six-lined Racerunners have. However, Six-lined Racerunners can easily be distinguished from skinks by their rougher, more plate-like, enlarged, granular scalation (as opposed to very smooth and sleek scalation of skinks).

The subspecies of Six-lined Racerunner occurring in Wisconsin is also known as the Prairie Racerunner (*Aspidoscelis sexlineatus viridis*).



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Range and Distribution: Six-lined Racerunners have a broad range and distribution over the eastern United States, ranging from Maryland to most of Florida except the southern tip, west through Missouri, and much of Texas, and into extreme eastern New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. Six-lined Racerunners occur north through the Great Plains states to South Dakota and along the Mississippi River basin northeast to Wisconsin and Minnesota, and through to Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan. In Wisconsin, Six-lined Racerunners are most prevalent along the Chippewa, Mississippi, and Wisconsin Riverway basins of western and southwestern Wisconsin, in the Unglaciated Driftless Area. Six-lined Racerunners often occur in locally common pockets or populations.



Ventral/Belly View. © Herps of Arkansas.

Habitat: Six-lined Racerunners are strongly associated obligates of habitats with deep, sandy or loamy

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soil, primarily in the western and southwestern regions of Wisconsin. Dry, sand prairies, old fields, oak savannahs, sand barrens, pine barrens, dry mesic prairies, or open, sandy juniper-oak woodlands or dunes can all be excellent habitats for Six-lined Racerunners. They can also be found along dry prairie hillsides and on steeper river bluff prairies or dry bluff openings as well (within about 1 to 4 miles of the rivers).

Feeding and Diet: Six-lined Racerunners are active hunters, and 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: Six-lined Racerunners are one of four native lizard species in Wisconsin. Six-lined Racerunners are generally active in the year from about early to mid-May, through August or September, and seem to have a relatively shorter window of activity in the year than many other of Wisconsin's amphibian and reptile species. In the spring, from May through June is when breeding and mating most often take place, where the males develop brighter blue, turquoise, or teal-blue coloration on their upper labials, throats, chins, and undersides. During breeding, male Six-lined Racerunners become highly territorial, and will chase out any other rival males which enter their small territories or home ranges, and mate with the females during this time.

By mid-June or July, females will construct a small chamber in sandy soil underneath rocks, logs, stumps, or other decaying or ground debris and lay anywhere from about 3 to 8 eggs. Six-lined Racerunners may lay one or two clutches in a year, depending on the area. Unlike skinks, or many other lizards, Six-lined Racerunners do not brood or guard their eggs thereafter, which hatch by mid-to late August or September. This is by the time adults have already begun overwintering again deep within sandy burrows or cavities underground, underneath rocks, logs, rock outcrops, or other debris. Hatchling and juvenile Six-lined Racerunners remain surface-active in the year later than the adults, until late September.

Six-lined Racerunners are almost strictly diurnal lizards, being very active even during the hot summer months where they forage for food along sand blows or sand dunes and amongst the grass by flicking their tongues on the ground to pick up chemical scent cues. The tongues, when flicked out, are a short, thick and only somewhat forked pinkish or reddish in color. These active, fast moving lizards usually will forage during the late morning or early afternoon, running in quick dashes from place to place, or in short, jerky movements. When threatened or disturbed, Six-lined Racerunners will make a quick, rapid, and irregular dashes, as their common names imply, into the nearest burrow, crevice, or other debris. Oftentimes, all one hears or sees of them are either the rustling in the dry grass or leaves, their bluish-green-yellow streaks of their stripes and/or blurred silhouette of a small lizard as they escape to cover. They are usually very challenging to catch, unless flipped under cover during cooler weather or if one happens to be able to get one cornered while after going under cover.

Six-lined Racerunners usually construct sandy burrows, or will utilize the burrows of other small

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mammals or other animals not only to escape predation, but to also thermoregulate during low or high temperatures not conducive to above ground activity. If grabbed, or seized, Six-lined Racerunners can also voluntarily detach or push off all or portions of their tails, but not quite as readily or as easily as skinks. Their detached tails will then writhe and wriggle for several minutes, which distracts any potential predators long enough for the lizard to escape. Like skinks, a new tail is generated in Six-lined Racerunners within a few weeks. Six-lined Racerunners may also attempt to bite if handled; however, their small mouths and teeth very seldom break the skin, and are very rarely consequential.

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

Conservation Status: In Wisconsin, Six-lined Racerunners 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. Six-lined Racerunners are currently not protected or regulated federally. Six-lined Racerunners are currently IUCN Red-List Least Concern (LC).