

Broad-headed Skinks and the Department of Defense



Picture by Paul Block-Marine Forces Reserve Center Jacksonville

The Broad-headed Skink (*Plestiodon laticeps*) is the largest lizard in most of its range, excluding the legless glass lizards. It is frequently seen on trees and around buildings, especially when foraging on porches and decks. It gets its name from the large head of the adult male.

Description: Broad-headed Skinks are large lizards with a total length of 6-13 inches (15-33 cm). They have short legs and a smooth, shiny, streamlined body. They are gray or brown, with five white or yellowish stripes that are most prominent in younger animals. Adults of both sexes fade to a uniform gray or brown, and mature males develop enlarged orange heads during the spring breeding season. Females and immature males are very similar in appearance to Five-lined Skinks (*P. fasciatus*) and Southeastern Five-lined Skinks (*P. inexpectatus*), the young of which all have bright blue tails and prominent stripes.

Range: This species ranges widely through the southeastern United States, except for much of the Appalachian Mountains. It occurs from southeastern Pennsylvania, central Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and eastern Kansas, south to eastern Texas, the Gulf Coast, and central Florida.

Habitat: Broad-headed Skinks prefer wooded areas that have hollow trees or large rotting stumps or logs, living in the cavities that these provide.



Source: IUCN

Behavior: This lizard is active during the day and is quite conspicuous due to its size. It is a better climber than other skinks, and extremely wary, and therefore difficult to capture. Mating occurs in spring, when males develop bright orange heads and become territorial. Females create a nest in a cavity under the bark of a dead tree or in a rotting stump. The clutch of up to 22 eggs is tended by the female until the young hatch. Prey includes a variety of insects, spiders, and other invertebrates. Home range is small; probably only 30-40 meters in diameter if similar to other species studied.

Military Interactions: This species commonly occurs on DoD properties in the Southeast, both in military training and housing areas.

Conservation Status: The Broad-headed Skink has no federal conservation status. It is listed as state-threatened in Kansas and as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) in Delaware, Kansas, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. It has a NatureServe Ranking of G5-Secure, and is listed as Least Concern by the IUCN Red list.

Threats/Planning Considerations: The primary threat to this species is loss of forested habitats. A management practice to benefit this species is to retain snags, fallen logs, and large trees, especially in open grassy areas of forest. Another significant threat is intentional killing by humans, many of who share an erroneous belief that the bright bluish tail of juveniles and females of this and other species of skinks signify that it is dangerously venomous.

