

NORTHERN ALLIGATOR LIZARD

ELGARIA COERULEA (WEIGMANN, 1828)

NATURAL HISTORY SUMMARY BY KATE DUROST

Classification

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Family: Anguidae

Genus: *Elgaria*

Species: *E. coerulea*

Description

The Northern Alligator Lizard (*Elgaria coerulea*) ranges in color from gray, olive, and rust, to greenish or bluish dorsally with heavy blotching or barring in a dusky color. Its eyes are completely dark or dark around the pupils. There are dark stripes between the scale rows on the belly, though they can sometimes be absent. Dorsal scales are usually in 16 rows. Four subspecies have been described: *E. c. coerulea*, *E. c. shastensis*, *E. c. principis*, and *E. c. palmeri*, with *E. c. principis*, or the Northwestern Alligator Lizard being the one most likely to be found in Washington. The Northwestern Alligator Lizard tends to be small – less than 4 in long, with a broad dorsal stripe of tan, olive, golden brown, or gray and contrasting dusky sides. The dorsal scales are weakly keeled in 14 rows with the temporal scales also being weakly keeled (Stebbins 2003).

Distribution

The Northern Alligator Lizard is found along the western coast of North America. *Elgaria coerulea principis* has the largest range of any of the subspecies, ranging from southern Oregon to British Columbia, Canada while the others are concentrated in California (CaliforniaHerps 2017). *Elgaria coerulea*'s [range map](#) is available at Hammerson 2007.

Diet

The Northern Alligator Lizard primarily eats a variety of small invertebrates like ticks, spiders, centipedes, slugs, millipedes, snails, and worms as well as any of their larvae. It will also eat small lizards and small mammals and occasionally feed on bird eggs and young birds (CaliforniaHerps, 2017; Stebbins 2003).

Habitat and Ecology

The Northern Alligator Lizard can be found in woodland and forest under rocks, bark, in rotten logs, and other similar objects (Stebbins 2003). In a study comparing habitat use between Northern Alligator Lizards and Western Skinks (*Plestiodon skiltonianus*) it was found that when sharing an area with the skinks, *E. coerulea* preferred larger rocks for their habitat, but showed no similar preference when they were alone in an area, suggesting that there might be some slight competition for habitat. However, for the most part, they were syntopic with the skinks (Rutherford 2003).

Reproduction and Life Cycle

The Northern Alligator Lizard is viviparous and young are born sometime between June and September. During the spring breeding season, a male lizard will grab on to the head of a female with his mouth until she lets him mate with her. They can remain attached this way for many hours, oblivious to their surroundings. This behavior works to keep the female from running off to mate with another male, and is possibly a show of how strong and suitable a mate the male is (CaliforniaHerps 2017).

Conservation Status

In 2007, the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species listed the Northern Alligator Lizard as a species of “Least Concern” due to its large distribution and stable populations (Hammerson 2007). Their primary threat could be outright habitat destruction. However, the introduction of the cinnabar moth (*Tyria jacobaeae*) for control over the invasive tansy ragweed (*Senecio jacobaea*) may have adverse effects on them as well, as the moths are reported to be highly toxic to the lizards (Nussbaum et al. 1983).

Cultural significance

Northern Alligator Lizards are often kept as hardy pets, capable of living 10 or more years.

Specimen Specific Detail

The Northern Alligator Lizard specimens from the [Burton Ostenson Museum of Natural History](#) collection at Pacific Lutheran University (PLU) are all of the subspecies *E. c. principis*. They were collected three miles west of Puyallup which places them in the vicinity of the PLU campus in Pierce County, Washington in general. No collection date or collector name is indicated.

Literature Cited

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