

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

WESTERN SKINK

Plestiodon skiltonianus

Family: SCINCIDAE
R036

Order: SQUAMATA

Class: REPTILIA

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

This common but secretive species is found throughout northern California. In central and southern California, the western skink is restricted to the Coast Ranges and southern mountains exclusive of desert regions. It is also present in Tulare and Kern cos. as well as along the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada in Inyo Co. Found in a variety of habitats, this lizard is most common in early successional stages or open areas within habitats in which it occurs. Heavy brush and densely forested areas are generally avoided. Its elevational range extends from sea level to 2530 m (8300 ft) (Stebbins 1985). In northern Inyo County however, it is found at elevations from 2130 to 3050 m (7000 to 10000 ft) (Macey and Papenfuss 1991).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Skinks forage actively through leaf litter and dense vegetation and occasionally dig in loose soil. Tanner (1957) reported insect eggs, adult and larval beetles, caterpillars, moths, grasshoppers, crickets, insect larvae, ants, spiders, centipedes, and sow bugs among the food items of the western skink. Prey is sometimes stalked. Cannibalism has been reported (Zweifel 1952).

Cover: Cover for these secretive lizards is provided by rotting logs, surface litter, and large flat stones. Western skinks are good burrowers and sometimes construct burrows several times their own body length.

Reproduction: Nest chambers are constructed by females in loose moist soil several centimeters deep; under surface objects, especially flat stones, sometimes in, or in the vicinity of, rock outcrops.

Water: No information on water requirements. Individuals seem to prefer somewhat moist micro-habitats, and the soil of nest chambers is invariably moist. Standing water is apparently not required.

Pattern: This lizard is commonest in early successional stages or open areas within habitats in which it occurs. Heavy brush and densely forested areas are generally avoided.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: This skink is diurnal during the period of warm-season activity. During summer most activity is concentrated in the morning and late afternoon. Where summer temperatures are not extreme, activity extends throughout the day (Zweifel 1952, Tanner 1957). Males are most often encountered in spring during the early part

of the reproductive season while guarding egg clutches. At this time they become quite secretive. Adult skinks usually become inactive by early fall but juveniles extend their period of activity several weeks.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Predictable seasonal movements have not been reported for this species in California.

Home Range: There is little information on the exact nature of the home range in this skink. Studying the related species *E. fasciatus* in Kansas, Fitch and von Achen (1977) found that females guarding eggshad extremely small home ranges of 0.005 ha (0.01 ac). During the rest of the year females had home ranges averaging 0.09 ha (0.2 ac), only a little less than those of males. Home ranges apparently are not fixed, but are subject to constant revision depending on environmental conditions. Complete relocation is not uncommon.

Territory: Tanner (1957) doubted the existence male territoriality. Females stay in the vicinity of egg clutches and in some cases guard the eggs from intruders (Tanner 1943, 1957).

Reproduction: The reproductive season for this species varies geographically and from year to year depending on local conditions. Mating probably occurs in the spring soon after emergence. Stebbins (1954) suggested that in central California, eggs are deposited in July. In the Great Basin nest chambers with eggs have been observed only in July and August (Tanner 1957). Clutch size ranges from 2 to 6 eggs (Tanner 1957, Punzo 1982).

Niche: Western skinks have been found in the stomachs of rattlesnakes (Zweifel 1952) and garter snakes (Tanner 1943). They are probably food for several other snakes, including night snakes, kingsnakes, ringneck snakes, and racers. Other probable predators include diurnal birds and a variety of mammals. Some competition for food and/or space may occur with the Gilbert's skink where the two species coexist, as in the inner Coast Ranges and southern mountains, and in the northern Sierra Nevada.

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