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## North American Skinks (*Plestiodon* sp.)

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### **Little Natives with Big Attitude**

North American skinks can vary considerably in size, coloration, and appearance depending on the species, age, sex, and reproductive status of the animal. In general though, these are small to medium sized skinks with a semi-elongated bodies, reduced to sometimes absent limbs, and smooth scales. Ground color can range from blackish, tan, bronze, light to dark brown. Depending on the species, there may be one to five or more yellowish to lighter colored longitudinal stripes or wider, darker lateral bands or stripes present. During the mating and reproductive season, males of several species will also develop broad, vibrantly reddish to reddish orange heads and/or jaws as well. Juveniles and females of many species can also have vibrantly blue to pinkish colored tails as well. These skinks will readily practice caudal autotomy, which involves voluntarily dropping all or parts of their tails to distract potential predators, and which will regenerate several days to weeks later (although not as colorful or natural as the original tail).

### **Taxonomy**

**Life:** All living, physical, and animate entities

**Domain:** Eukaryota

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Phylum/Sub Phylum:** Chordata/Vertebrata

**Class:** Reptilia

**Order:** Squamata

**Suborder:** Lacertilia

**Infraorder:** Scincomorpha

**Family:** Scincidae

**Genus:** *Plestiodon*

**Species:** *Plestiodon* sp.\*

\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

### **Lifespan and Longevity**

If provided the correct care, these skinks can attain longevity of 5 to 10 years, or slightly more.

### **Species**

Over 30 species are recognized. However, the largest and most commonly seen species in the pet trade are the Common Five Lined Skink (*P. fasciatus*), Southeastern Five Lined Skink (*P. inexpectus*), Great Plains Skink (*P. obsoletus*), Northern Prairie Skink (*P. septentrionalis*), Coal Skink (*P. anthracinus*), and Broad Headed Skink (*P. laticeps*).

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### **Distribution and Habitat**

These skinks can also occur in a variety of habitats depending on the species, which can include deciduous hardwood and/or mixed forests, woodlands, or woodlots, swamp and wetland margins, sandy road/railroad/river margins, open prairies and plains, rocky foothills, and other humid to semi-moist forested areas. North American skinks are a large genus of relatively small to medium sized skink species that are generally indigenous to much of the south central, central, Midwestern, southeastern, to eastern United States and southeastern Canada (Quebec and Ontario) depending on the exact species.

### **Conservation Status**

Conservation status dependent upon the species. Some species are IUCN Least Concern (LC). Some are IUCN Near Threatened (NT), Conservation Dependent (CD), Vulnerable (VU), Endangered (EN), to Critically Endangered (CE). Some Not Evaluated for the IUCN Red List (NE) or otherwise Data Deficient (DD).

### **Experience Level Required**

Novice/Beginner to Intermediate/Moderate.

### **Size**

Adult size depends on the species, but most species range from 2 to 8 inches. Some of the larger species, such as the broad headed skink, *P. laticeps* and Great Plains skink, *P. obsoletus* however can reach up to 12 to 15 inches.

### **Housing and Enclosure**

Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Depending on the age, size, or species, anywhere from a 10 to 40 gallon long terrarium or similar sized plastic or glass enclosure should be used. Most species of North American skinks can be housed in pairs or in multiples in accordingly larger quarters, but males of most species can become territorial and may fight. Provide these skinks with substrates that enable burrowing such as fine aspen shavings, cypress mulch, or orchid bark. Provide a hide box and artificial foliage, driftwood, rocks, cork bark, or logs for ample basking and hiding opportunities. Also be sure to provide a small bowl or dish of fresh water that should be cleaned and replaced at least two to three times weekly, or if dirtied. Misting once to twice daily will also help maintain humidity at around 60 to 80% that these skinks will enjoy.

### **Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity**

For basking, create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure with an appropriate sized under tank heating pad, ceramic, or radiant heat emitter. Ideal temperatures for these skinks range from 75 to 85 degrees F on the cool side and about 90 to 95 degrees F on the warm, basking side. The precise temperature and humidity requirements will also vary somewhat depending on the species being maintained and their geographic distributions. Providing the correct amounts of UVA/UVB overhead incandescent and florescent lighting, and calcium-to-phosphorus ratios is essential for ensuring the health and overall well-being of North American skinks in captivity. Without UVA/UVB, or adequate amounts of it, they can be susceptible to the abnormal bone growth and development known as Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD), and other health and development maladies. Also be sure to spot clean the enclosure for urates, feces, or uneaten food at least twice per week. Be sure to periodically replace the substrate, clean, and disinfect the enclosure and its furnishings at minimum every 2 to 3 months. More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's

needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

### **Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition**

**Primarily Insectivorous**; In the wild, North American skinks are primarily insectivorous, meaning they will eat insects, arachnids, worms, and other invertebrates, as well as occasionally other small vertebrates. In captivity, feed North American skinks a variety of appropriately sized feeder insects such as crickets, roaches, mealworms, superworms, fruit fly cultures, or waxworms. Feeder insects should be gut-loaded in order to increase their optimal nutritional value. These skinks also require additional calcium and vitamin D3 supplementation 1 to 2 times weekly or as otherwise directed for optimal health and development. This is in order to prevent Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD) and other growth and nutritional deficiencies. Other feeder items, such as small, pre-killed rodents can also be given on occasion, but sparingly. Overall feeding frequency will depend on the age, size, and overall health of your animal. Use care as to not overfeed them, as obesity and other health related issues can become an issue. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

### **Handling**

Many species of North American skinks can become very bold and accustomed to regular human interaction, and can often even be hand fed. However, captive bred specimens are still quite infrequent, with most being wild caught. As such, many can still be nervous or skittish, especially when handling is attempted. Some very well acclimated specimens may be able to be handled or held gently for short periods of time, but are often a faster moving and flightier species when in hand. Care should therefore be taken to not accidentally drop these animals when handling them. This is especially the case with these skinks, which may practice caudal autotomy by dropping all or portions of their tails when frightened or roughly handled. Overall, most of these species of skinks are hardy and easily kept and cared for, but as far as handling, are better suited for display and viewing (particularly larger adult male specimens).

**\*\*Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens\*\***

### **Contact**

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this animal, group of animals, or this care sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at [info@madisonherps.org](mailto:info@madisonherps.org)

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