

Creating a home for lizards



A rustling in the garden probably means that a reptile is about, looking for a sunny spot or foraging for food. Lizards are a welcome visitor in gardens where they will feed on plants, slugs and bugs.

Lizards of South Australia

South Australia is home to approximately 180 lizard species with new species still being discovered.

There are four families of lizards in South Australia:

1. dragons, with 37 species
2. geckos (~30 species) and legless lizards (~18 species)
3. skinks, the largest family with almost 90 species
4. goannas, with eight species.

Several species of lizards have lost much of their natural habitat and are threatened with extinction in South Australia. These include the aptly named Pygmy Blue-tongue Lizard and the much larger Rosenberg's Goanna.

A number of other reptiles are threatened within the Adelaide metropolitan area, such as the Five-lined Earless Dragon and Painted Dragon.

Some lizards, like the larger Blue-tongue Skinks, are commonly found in suburban gardens where there are rocks, open drains or piles of timber to provide them with shelter.

They live on or near the ground, feeding on a variety of invertebrates including snails which they find in leaf litter and amongst groundcover plants. They also eat plant material, especially flowers and fruits like Cape Weed and strawberries.

Another common suburban lizard is the Marbled Gecko, a small grey arboreal gecko which loves to hunt spiders and insects on the walls of houses on warm evenings.

Favourite daytime hiding spots are under loose bark on trees, old sheets of iron, stacks of bricks or pavers and wooden sleepers..

Threats

A number of pressures threaten the viability of lizard populations. The primary threat is habitat loss through urban development. A trend toward manicured gardens and cleared spaces has led to a decrease in the availability of shelter, habitat and food resources.

Another major impact on lizard populations is predation by introduced animals including rats, cats, dogs, and foxes as well as blackbirds which are efficient predators of the smaller skinks! Pet cats left to roam outside can be particularly detrimental to lizard populations.



A Marbled Gecko on the lookout. Sharing your garden with these wonderful and harmless creatures is a sign that your backyard is wildlife friendly.

Habitat requirements

Lizards need debris that provides camouflage, shelter and refuge from predators.

Leaving a good supply of leaves and twigs on the ground provides habitat for the insects that are a food source, and also enables the lizards to move around safely.

It will also attract micro-organisms that improve soil condition, act as a weed control, and help the soil to not lose much water through evaporation.

Lizards are 'cold-blooded' and therefore rely on heat from the sun to raise their body temperature. Incorporate flat sustainably sourced rocks into your garden landscape where they can be warmed by the sun – make sure some shelter is near, so that sunning lizards can retreat if in danger.

One tip is to elevate the rocks slightly, or put them in a little pile so the lizard can slip under if threatened.

Hollow logs, crevices between bricks and rocks, groundcover plants and native grasses offer protection, as well as a place to hibernate during the winter months.

Water

Frogs have a semi-permeable skin that allows moisture and Lizards get much of their water from their food and have very efficient bodies that lose little moisture through their skin. However they will drink if water is available, especially in hot weather.

Be sure to provide a means of escape from your ponds and even large water bowls (such as a partially submerged log or rock) to prevent lizards that fall in from drowning.



Chemical use

The lizards in your garden are a natural pest control for a number of invertebrates, as they will happily eat pesky slugs, snails and a variety of insects that love to munch on your garden so you can avoid using pesticides. Also avoid using snail pellets, as snails that have consumed poison will be harmful to any lizard that eats them.

Did you know?

Shingleback Lizards, also known as Stumpy-tail Skink or Sleepy Lizards, live solitary lives when not breeding. They pair up to breed each spring with the same mate year after year. They have live young, usually only one or two, which can weigh as much as 35% of the adult's body weight. An equivalent human baby would weigh 50 pounds (23 kg)!

Geckos are distinguished from other kinds of lizards by their distinct finger and toe pads used for climbing. They are usually active at night (nocturnal), especially the hours after sunset. Geckos also lay eggs with hard shells – usually at communal sites in early summer.

You can help

Have plenty of natural cover, fallen logs and rocks for lizards to use. Also plant some low groundcovers that provide cover and food for lizards. Keep your cats and dogs inside, or fence off areas that they cannot access and provide safe habitat for lizards there.

Why a backyard for wildlife?

In Australia, gardening has been recognised as one of our favourite pastimes. What we do in our home gardens has the potential to benefit or harm the natural environment.

By developing and maintaining a garden that follows the five basic Backyards 4 Wildlife principles you will contribute to a better local environment, help conserve our local flora and fauna, create important habitat, reduce your maintenance costs, and reduce the threat of invasive environmental weeds.

Top 5 tips

1. Use plants native to your suburb.
2. Plant species that are a range of heights.
3. Use mix of local native plants that flower throughout the year.
4. Manage your pets responsibly.
5. Minimise chemical use.

Please consider applying some of these principles to your own backyard, so that together we can help grow a great living environment for Adelaide.



Eastern Blue-tongue Lizards have hung on in our suburbs but urban consolidation is reducing their available habitat

For more information

South Australian Herpetology Group, Inc.
www.saherpetologygroup.org

Goanna Watch citizen scientist program
www.discoverycircle.org.au

Visit the urban biodiversity page of our website to access more Backyards 4 Wildlife information and contact details for specialist native plant nurseries.

www.naturalresources.sa.gov.au/adelaidentloftyranges

Or contact your nearest Natural Resources Centre

Black Hill
115 Maryvale Road, Athelstone, SA 5076
P (08) 8336 0901

Eastwood
205 Greenhill Road, Eastwood, SA 5063
P (08) 8273 9100

Gawler
8 Adelaide Road, Gawler South, SA 5118
P (08) 8523 7700

Willunga
5 Aldinga Road, Willunga, SA 5172
P (08) 8550 3400

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