

CELEBRATING SKINKS, ZOOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA LISTS 62 SPECIES

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

Bronzed Grass Skink (left) and the Sand Skink. Photo: Zoological Survey of India

With long bodies, relatively small or no legs, no pronounced neck and glossy scales, skinks are common reptiles around homes, garages, and open spaces such as parks and school playgrounds, and around lakes. Although they are common reptiles and have a prominent role in maintaining ecosystems, not much is known about their breeding habits, and ecology because identification of the species can be confusing.

A recent publication by the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) reveals that India is home to 62 species of skinks and says about 57% of all the skinks found in India (33 species) are endemic.

The publication, *Skinks of India*, was released earlier this month by Union Minister of State, Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change Babul Supriyo.

“It is the first monograph on this group of lizards, which are found in all kinds of habitats in the country, from the Himalayas to the coasts and from dense forests to the deserts,” Kaushik Deuti, scientist of ZSI and one of the authors of the publication, said.

Director ZSI Kailash Chandra, said while a lot of work is done on other groups of reptiles like snakes or geckos, skinks are an ignored species.

Skinks are highly alert, agile and fast moving and actively forage for a variety of insects and small invertebrates. The reduced limbs of certain skink species or the complete lack of them make their slithering movements resemble those of snakes, leading people to have incorrect notion that they are venomous. This results in several of these harmless creatures being killed.

“The publication is a result of four years of work and study of over 4,000 specimens in all 16 regional centres of ZSI and also at the Bombay Natural History Society, Indian Institute of Science, Wildlife Institute of India, and the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology & Natural History. It also makes an attempt to ‘redescribe’ all the 62 species with their taxonomic identification keys, distributional maps, habits, habitat and breeding biology,” Dr. Chandra said.

The book also gives a phylogenetic and bio-geographical analysis of distribution of these species in all the 11 bio-geographic zones of India and a detailed account on the historical studies on this group of lizards from the British era to the present.

The Western Ghats are home to 24 species of which 18 are endemic to the region. The Deccan Peninsular region is home to 19 species of which 13 are endemic. There are records of 14 skink species from the northeast of which two species are endemic.

Dr Deuti, however, pointed out that with 1,602 species of skinks across the world, making it the largest family of lizards, their occurrence in India is less than 4 % of the global diversity.

Of the 16 genera of skinks found in India, four genera are endemic. *Sepsophis* (with one species) and *Barkudia* (with two species) are limbless skinks found in the hills and coastal plains of the eastern coast. *Barkudia insularis* believed to be found only in the Barkud Island in Chilka

lake in Odisha. *Barkudia melanosticta* is endemic to Visakhapatnam. *Sepsophis punctatus* is endemic to the northern part of Eastern Ghats. Five species of *Kaestlea* (blue-tailed ground skinks) are endemic to the Western Ghats and four species of *Ristella* (Cat skinks) also endemic to the southern part of Western Ghats.

Other authors of the publication, Achyuthan Srikanthan from the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, and three other ZSI researchers — Sujoy Raha, Probhat Bag and Sudipta Debnath — said that alongside its taxonomic significance, the book will generate interest among nature enthusiasts and lay people about skinks.

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