

Lizards 2: the common lizard



Of the two species of lizard found in and around our parishes, the common lizard (*Zootoca vivipara*) is not as widely distributed as the slow worm (see June column). It is known (so far) from only a few locations in both parishes. This mirrors its UK distribution, which is widespread but not common and can be best described as local.

Common lizards are found in a wide range of habitats, especially open woodland, downland and abandoned and derelict land. However their preferred habitat is damp heathland. The best local spot for them is Pound Common. They can be found in wildlife-friendly gardens, especially if the garden backs onto suitable habitat. There are very few populations in intensively farmed areas.

Common lizards occur in a range of colours. Shades of grey, ginger and dull green are common, as is melanism (dark pigment in the skin). Males are typically patterned with lines of fine black and white flecks, slightly darker flanks and an orange underside. Females generally have a pale back with dark markings and a dark vertebral line, contrasting dark flanks and a yellow underside. When intact, the tail is long, with a rough appearance. However it is common for lizards to have lost their tail and for it to have regrown shorter and darker. Adults with their original tails are typically 12–15cm in length.

Adults emerge from hibernation in March. The males usually emerge a few weeks before the females and use the time to bask and shed their skin so they look their best for the start of the breeding season. Mating occurs between April and May. The females produce between three and 11 young in July. The young are born in an egg sac that breaks either during birth or soon after. They are 4cm long and dark brown/black in colour.

If found in winter, it is easy to confuse lizards with one of the native newt species, as both will move slowly if disturbed. Lizards, however, have scaly skin and much longer fingers and toes. This confusion is less likely throughout the other seasons as all newt species when on land will barely move if disturbed.

In spring male and female lizards both bask in the open to absorb the heat from the sun. Later in the summer it is usually only the pregnant females that are seen to bask. They will often bask on a stone, log or grass tussock, close to cover. Once warm they disperse into vegetation to feed, using their speed and agility to catch prey. They eat small insects – particularly flies, grasshoppers and spiders. Lizards are also attracted to ripe fruit in autumn. In good habitats it is thought that common lizards are not seriously limited by the food resource; they are thought to feed heavily only 100–130 days a year. Individuals show a marked preference for certain prey items.

Lizards' natural predators are kestrels, crows and smooth snakes. Cats and pheasants pose a greater threat but it is poor habitat that really limits this agile little hunter.

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