

Common Lizard

Latin Name: *Zootoca vivipara*
Irish Name: Laghairt choiteann

The common lizard's Latin name is *Zootoca vivipara* which means 'live birth' in Greek (*zootoca*) and again in Latin (*vivipara*).

This is a big clue as to what makes this species so special. In most reptiles around the world, eggs are laid in order to reproduce. The common lizard, however, incubates its young internally and gives birth to live young.

This reproductive strategy has enabled the species to become the reptile with the largest geographical range – they are found as far east as some islands of Japan, as far south as northern Portugal, as far north as parts of the Scandinavian and Russian Arctic regions, and as far west as Ireland.

Egg laying reptiles need relatively dry, warm climates to ensure their eggs survive but having live young means the common lizard can survive and reproduce in damper climates such as Ireland. Incredibly, the common lizard does lay eggs in certain warmer regions of its range.

The common lizard is Ireland's only native species of reptile. It has survived here since the last ice-age over 11,000 years ago.

A second species of reptile can be found in Ireland, the slow-worm (*Anguis fragilis*), a species of legless lizard, was introduced to the Burren in the 1970's.

Another behaviour which has aided the lizard's success in Ireland is the fact that it **hibernates** through the winter months from October-March. Usually in communal burrows or in crevices under logs/rocks, the lizards remain hidden until the temperatures increase in February/March.

The males are the first to emerge, followed by the females, and then mating occurs in early Spring.



When?

March - October

Where?

South facing banks, stone walls,
sand dunes

Size?

approx 15cm from nose to tail

Where to see common lizards on the Iveragh peninsula?

- Derrynane area
- Walls and banks of Skellig Way trail
- Coad Bog

**Please remember it is illegal to handle common lizards without a license.
Only do so if a lizard is in danger, such as you are rescuing one from a cat or you find
one indoors. Never try to catch a lizard by its tail!**

Photos ©LindaLync

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Females (pictured right) tend to have a continuous dark stripe along their spine and are a little 'stockier' than males to accommodate the growth of young inside. Males (pictured right) generally have a speckled pattern on their backs and a bulge where the tail meets the body. The main colour tends to be brown but some individuals can be olive, green or even rare black 'melanistic' lizards have been found. The young appear in early August and are dark bronze in colour before they beginning to develop the markings seen on adults.

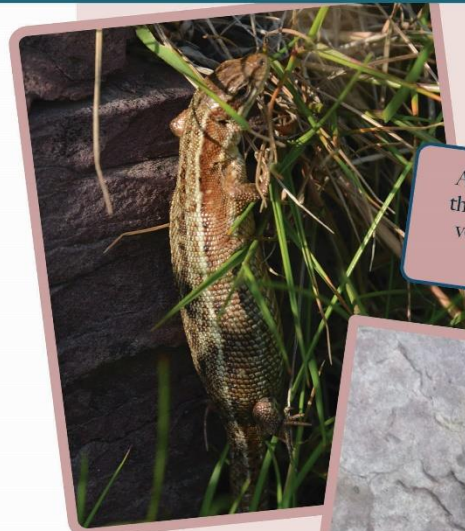
Lizards hunt spiders, flies and other invertebrates in the undergrowth. When we see lizards, it tends to be when they are '**basking**'. As they cannot regulate their own body-heat (they are known as '**ectotherms**'), they will often soak up the sun's rays by flattening their body to increase their surface area to warm up. Pregnant females will spend more time doing this in early summer as it aids the development of the embryos and they appear more rounded, unable to flatten their bodies due to their young inside. Once an optimum temperature is reached, they will resume hunting activities. Lizards also need to be careful not to overheat, so hiding from the sun on hot days or reduced basking times will occur on hot days.

The common lizard is a food source for many predators including birds such as kestrel, pheasants and even stonechat. If caught by a predator, the lizard can 'drop' its tail, a process known as **autotomy**.

The tail continues moving to distract the predator while the lizard makes their escape. Often, individuals can have a shorter tail or one that looks different to the body while it is in the process of being regrown.

Regrowing a tail takes a lot of energy and can impact their hibernation success as tails include an important fat store. Cats regularly catch and kill lizards and are one of their biggest threats along with habitat loss.

Log your Iveragh Common Lizard sightings here:
www.ecomuseumlive.eu/commonlizard



A heavily pregnant female that has climbed out of the vegetation to bask in the sun



Males generally have a speckled pattern on their backs, and a bulge where the tail meets the body



Newborn lizards display a dark bronze colour until they gain their adult markings.



The common lizard sheds its skin and finding a 'glove' like this (left) is often a clue that lizards are in the area

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Photos ©LindaI.yne

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FAQs

Why don't we have snakes in Ireland?

The Irish climate is too cold & wet to allow egg-laying reptiles, as with many snakes, to survive here. Eggs left to incubate in damp soil start to rot and unfortunately don't survive. Some snakes, such as the adder, give birth to live young, and are found in the UK, however, a number of small introduction attempts have failed to succeed.

How do I know if it is a newt or a lizard?

Lizards move quicker, have scaly skin and have 5 toes on all 4 feet. Newts move slowly on land, have smooth skin and only have 4 toes on their front feet (5 on their hind-feet). While lizards are good swimmers, they are rarely seen in ponds while newts will reproduce in ponds in spring.

Where can I see lizards?

Although they can be tricky to spot due to their camouflage, lizards are recorded as being widespread in Ireland. Usually seen on south-facing banks, stone walls or sand dunes. They like to be close to cover to protect them from predators so keep an eye on the edges of paths or vegetation.

When can I see lizards?

They are active from March–October and the best time to see them is when the sun reappears after a shower of rain or first thing in the morning when they need to bask to warm-up.

How many young do they have?

The average is 5–8 young per clutch, 4–5cm long and dark bronze in colour. They are independent from birth although they can be seen basking together or with adults.

What threats do they face?

Habitat loss can separate populations and reduce safe hibernation sites. Climate changes such as unseasonal weather can impact their behaviours – very hot summers could reduce the amount of time they can stay out hunting for food before overheating, or cold snaps in spring could delay mating. Cats regularly kill lizards and are a big threat to them and many other native species.

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