



Department of Planning and Natural Resources
Division of Fish and Wildlife
U.S.V.I. Animal Fact Sheet #04

Virgin Islands Blind Snake
Amphisbaena fenestrata



The Virgin Islands blind snake, *Amphisbaena fenestrata*, also called the worm lizard, are not snakes. There are in fact lizards whose legs have disappeared due to their subterranean life. They still have rudimentary shoulder and pelvic girdles and are legless lizards. These animals are NOT poisonous. There are a couple species found with rudimentary front legs only. The Virgin Islands blind snake does not have visible legs.

The generic name (*Amphisbaena*) describes their ability to move equally forward and backward, both in the open and in their burrows. The name comes from Greek "that which walks in two directions". These reptiles have been placed in the order Amphisbaenia which is separate from the Serpentes (snakes) and Sauria (lizards), and may be distantly related to the Teiids (tegus, whiptails, ameivas, etc.).

Globally there are about 120 blind snake species of the family Amphisbaenidae. They are found in tropical and subtropical regions of America, Africa and the Mediterranean. There is only one genus of Amphisbaenidae present in the Caribbean (*Amphisbaena*), with about 18 different species. Puerto Rico and its nearshore islands have 4 known species. The U.S. Virgin Islands has only one known species of blind

snake. However St. Croix may have a separate species from St. John and St. Thomas.

Amphisbaena's in other locations can grow up to 60 cm (2 feet) long. The Virgin Islands blind snake rarely gets any larger than 15 cm (6 inches). They have adapted to a subterranean life by evolving reduced eyes, small heavy solid skulls and jaws that are partly fused together. *Amphisbaena*'s use their heads as shovels for burrowing through detritus and soil, tunneling under rocks, roots and fallen logs. They are rarely found above ground, and then only at night or after rains have flooded their burrows. Blind snakes are very sensitive to terrestrial vibrations and have an excellent sense of smell.



*Amphisbaena*s are small but fierce predators capable of biting off pieces of flesh from larger animals. They have also been seen occasionally eating carrion. Many don't hesitate to bite when handled. Their teeth are sharp and their jaw muscles are disproportionately strong. Only the largest species can inflict any serious pain to a human hand. There is nothing to fear from the VI Blind Snake.

Distribution & Habitat

VI blind snakes may be found throughout the Virgin Islands. On St. Thomas they are fairly common in moist areas. They have occasionally been seen on cement walkways and streets. They are commonly confused with

worms and may be more common than the average gardener is aware.

Diet

In contrast to most other lizards, the VI blind snake doesn't feed on large prey. They feed mostly on pupae, larvae, eggs, and adults of a variety of insects. They are also believed to prey upon the VI worm snake. Many worm snakes have been found with scars on the body that appear to have come from blind snakes.

With their elongated but stout bodies surrounded by rings of squarish scales, their inconspicuous eyes, and their usually gray, cream, or pink colors, these strange reptiles resemble fat earthworms. These are frequently confused with the worm snakes (Typhlopidae).

Reproduction

The blind snake lays soft shelled eggs like other reptiles. They are likely to deposit their eggs in protected areas, where the young will hatch and quickly be able to find food. The reproduction of the VI blind snake has not been studied. So we do not know the length of time it takes for the eggs to hatch, or the numbers of eggs laid. The reproductive biology of the VI blind snake is unknown.

Status in the VI

The ecology and general biology of blind snakes in the U.S. Virgin Islands is also unknown. The little we do know is from anecdotal evidence collected by individuals over the years. What we do know is that they are not very abundant because very few people have seen them. Those who have are mainly gardeners and farmers or others who spend time working with soil. There appear to be areas on the islands where the blind snakes are more common than others. These are more rural locations, where people have worked the land, particularly by hand.

They may also be seen by homeowners with cats. The cats may bring these snakes into the house. Blind snakes are frequently confused with earthworms because they are similarly shaped and colored.

What you can do to HELP

1. Please call the Division of Fish and Wildlife, 340-775-6762 St. Thomas/ St. John and 340-772-1955 St. Croix, if you see any Blind snakes or legless lizards.
2. The blind snake is very valuable to us. They eat invertebrates and other insects that we consider pests.
3. Reducing the amount of pesticides and chemicals we use to control pests will help the Blind Snake.
4. Please, if possible let them take care of themselves. They have been doing their job for millions of years, and are a great benefit to us.
5. Remember it is illegal to, or attempt to; take, catch, possess, injure, harass, or kill any indigenous species. The only exceptions are for people holding valid permits from the Division of Fish and Wildlife
6. For more information on this and other animals in the Virgin Islands please visit our website at:

www.vifishandwildlife.com

Written by William Coles 2003.
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FOR MORE INFORMATION ON OUR NATIVE ANIMALS CONTACT
DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
6291 ESTATE NAZARETH, 101,
ST. THOMAS, VI 00802
PHONE 340-775-6762 FAX 340-775-3972
OR
45 MARS HILL, ST. CROIX, VI 00840
PHONE 340-772-1955 FAX 340-772-3227**