

ST. THOMAS SOURCE

Endangered Species Suit Seeks to Protect Rare Lizards

By Lynda Lohr
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The Center for Biological Diversity filed a petition Tuesday asking the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to grant Endangered Species Act protection to nine newly identified species of skinks found only in the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. According to a press release from the center, these rare lizards with smooth skins are on the edge of extinction due to introduced predators and habitat destruction.

Five of the nine species are found in the Virgin Islands. The Greater St. Croix skink is found on St. Croix and Green Cay. The Lesser St. Croix skink lives on St. Croix.

The Greater Virgin Islands skink is found on St. Thomas and St. John. The Lesser Virgin Islands skink lives on St. Thomas, Capella Island and Buck Island, both located off St. Thomas, as well as several British Virgin Islands.

The Virgin Islands bronze skink is found on St. Thomas, Capella Island and Buck Island, and on several cays in the BVI and possibly St. John.

Four of the species are found in Puerto Rico: the Culebra skink on Culebra and Culebrita Cay; the Mona skink on Mona island; the Monito skink on Monito island; and the Puerto Rican skink throughout Puerto Rico and its satellite islands.

Renata Platenberg, an assistant professor of natural resources management at the University of the Virgin Islands, joined the Center for



The St. Croix skink
(courtesy of the Center for Biological Diversity).

Biological Diversity in filing the suit. Platenberg is a reptile specialist.

She said scientists initially thought all the skinks belonged to the same species or at least the same genus, but when researcher Blair Hedges of Pennsylvania State University looked at the genetic structures of the various skinks, he found each to be a unique species.

All of the newly identified endemic Caribbean skinks are near extinction or already extinct due to introduced predators like mongooses and cats, as well as large-scale habitat destruction for development and agriculture.

“Time is running out for these lizards,” said Collette Adkins Giese, a biologist at the center and lawyer focused on protecting reptiles and amphibians. “The Caribbean is home to extremely rare animals found nowhere else in the world, but too many have

already gone extinct. To save these skinks, we need to get them protected under the Endangered Species Act.”

The loss is alarming because reptiles play important roles as predators and prey in their ecosystems and they’re valuable indicators of environmental health. The animals in the petition will reap life-saving benefits from the Endangered Species Act, which has a 99 percent success rate at staving off extinction for species under its care.

Hedges, in the 2012 study that recognized the petitioned species, said, “Skinks have a slow-moving curiosity and are not adapted to fast predators such as the mongoose, introduced by humans.”

“The survival of these skinks depends on the special measures of protection that only the Endangered Species Act can provide,” he said.

Although reptiles have been around for hundreds of millions of years and survived every major extinction period, now, due largely to human impact, they’re dying off at up to 10,000 times the historic extinction rate. About 20 percent of reptiles in the world are endangered or vulnerable to extinction.

Within the Caribbean, scientists estimate that reptiles have levels of endangerment that are at or near the highest levels worldwide.

These Caribbean skinks, which can grow to be about 8 inches long, are unique among reptiles in having reproductive systems most like humans, including a placenta and live birth. They have cylindrical bodies, and most have ill-defined necks that, together with their sinuous movements and smooth, bronze-colored skin, make them look like stubby snakes.

Eight of the nine petitioned-for species fall within the genus *Spondylurus*, and one falls within the genus *Capitellum*. The genus *Spondylurus* includes what are now known as the Antillean four-lined skinks because of the four major dark stripes on their back and sides. Skinks in the genus *Capitellum* are called the Antillean small-headed skinks and have small feet and short heads, lacking dark dorsolateral stripes.