



Artwork by Dominic Cant

Curly-tailed Lizard

SCIENTIFIC NAME

There are five species, *Leiocephalus carinatus*, *L. greenwayi*, *L. inaguae*, *L. loxogrammus* and *L. punctatus* and nine sub-species in the Bahamas.

DESCRIPTION

The curly tailed lizards are medium sized lizards averaging about 18 cm (7 inches) in total length. In the Bahamas they tend to range from brown to grey and have a range of different markings on them depending upon the species. In some species the females are noticeably smaller than the males and some even display a more conspicuous colouration than their male counterparts, particularly when gravid (egg bearing). The most characteristic feature of these lizards is their tail which curls over their back, similar to that of a scorpion, and lends the lizard its name.

DIET

Curly tails can be considered omnivores, however insects form a major part of their diet. They have been known to eat flowers such as the Rail road vine (*Ipomoea pes-caprae*), seeds, small fruits, anole lizards, small crustaceans, spiders, roaches, mosquitoes and large quantities of ants. In captivity some males have exhibited a cannibalistic behaviour.

REPRODUCTION

Male curly tailed lizards are very territorial and fight off rival males. They also display a range of territorial behaviours like head bobbing, tail curling, strutting and inflation of the sides of the neck. The young males begin to exhibit these courtship behaviours at about one year of age. These behaviours will begin in February and usually ends in October when the lizards become generally less active. The leathery eggs are cream coloured and about 25 mm (1 inch) in length with peak hatching time in mid July. The hatchlings are about 5 cm (2 inches) in total length.

HABITAT

These lizards are xerophilic (arid loving) and can be found in a range of habitats in the Bahamas from coastal and rocky areas to shrub and pine lands as well as populated areas. However, they do prefer the coastal areas. These lizards are ground dwellers and love living behind a pile of rocks or a dead log.

DISTRIBUTION

Curly tailed lizards are found throughout the entire Bahamas. *L. carinatus* are the most wide spread with four different sub-species being found every where except for Crooked and Acklins, Mayaguana and Great and Little Inagua. *L. greenwayi* is an endemic species (only found in the Bahamas) and is only found on the Eastern island of the Plana Cays. *L. inaguae* is also endemic and is only found on Great Inagua. *L. loxogrammus* has 2 sub-species, one on Rum Cay and One on San Salvador island. *L. punctatus* is found on Crooked and Acklins islands.

STATUS

The Curly tailed lizards are not listed as in any need for special conservation by either the IUCN or CITES. However, *L. greenwayi* and *L. inaguae* need special attention as they are limited to one island. *L. greenwayi* of East Plana Cay is especially restricted and research needs to be done to determine its vulnerability.

THREATS

Introduced predators such as dogs, cats, rats and raccoons are a serious threat to the curly tails. Collection for the pet trade is an ever growing potential threat. As CITES does not list any of the curly tails as needing any protection from the International Trade. Reptile enthusiasts are always looking for more rare exotic species and this could be a problem for some of the endemics of the Bahamas. Development is an increasing potential threat as habitats are continuously affected. However, curly tails seem to adjust well to developed areas.

INTERESTING FACTS

L. carinatus was introduced to the island of Palm Beach in the 1940's. Within 20 years the original 20 pairs had spread 20 blocks. By 1968, researchers discovered that the lizards had spread to the mainland and they are rapidly spreading and is not considered an invasive species of Southern Florida.

The tail curling behaviour apparently plays many different roles for these lizards. It is documented as a territorial display, courtship display by males to attract females but also as a response to predators. Reportedly, it is believed that these lizards may curl their tail also to "fool" predators into attacking the tail instead of the head. Since the tail can be easily detached at certain points and re-grown as in all lizards, this is not a very effective anti-predatory response.