



Department of Planning and Natural Resources
Division of Fish and Wildlife
U.S.V.I. Animal Fact Sheet #10
St. Croix Ground Lizard
Ameiva polops



Taxonomy

Kingdom	-	-	Anamalia
Phylum	-	-	Chordata
Subphylum	-	-	Vertebrata
Class	-	-	Reptilia
Order	-	-	Squamata
Suborder	-	-	Autarchoglossa
Family	-	-	Teiidae
Genus	-	-	<i>Ameiva</i>
Species	-	-	<i>polops</i>

IDENTIFICATION CHARACTERISTICS

- ◆ Dorsal stripes are present
- ◆ Ringed tail
- ◆ Tail and belly color is bluish.

The St. Croix Ground Lizard (*Ameiva polops*) is a small species of *Ameiva*. It has parallel longitudinal black, white, and light-brown stripes along the body. The belly is light gray with lateral blue margins. The undersides of the legs, throat, and chest are pinkish. The tail has alternating rings of blue and black. The top of the head is a uniform brown color. The lizard is most readily identified by the blue color to the tail and when disturbed it does not climb, unlike similar looking anoles. The ground lizard when disturbed will seek shelter in burrows, under leaf litter, brush, rocks or wood.

The St. Croix Ground lizard is one of the most endangered species in the Virgin Islands. It was thought to be extinct on St. Croix during the early 20th century, but in the late 1960's a remnant population was observed on the beach north of Frederiksted. The Department of the Interior included the St. Croix ground lizard on their list of rare and endangered species in 1968. On June 3, 1977, the St. Croix ground lizard was designated as endangered throughout its entire range.

Historically the lizard has been recorded only on St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands and its offshore islands and cays. Currently only Green Cay and Protestant Cay off the north coast and the manmade Ruth Cay off the south shore of St. Croix are sites where this lizard is found. Both Green and Protestant Cays have been designated as Critical Habitat for the St. Croix Ground Lizard, Ruth Cay is proposed to be listed as critical habitat. Today the population probably does not exceed 400 individuals on Green Cay, 30 on Protestant Cay, and 35+ on Ruth Cay. This places the survival of this species of lizard in a very precarious position.

There are 19 species of *Ameiva*, in tropical America and the Caribbean. The closest species to the St. Croix ground lizard is the *Ameiva exsul* found on the Puerto Rico bank. However it is more closely related to *Ameiva taeniura* which is found on Hispaniola.

Very little is known of the life history and behavior of the ground lizard. What we do know is that it is a heliothermic temperature regulator. This means that they are active

during the middle portion of the day. On cooler and cloudy days the ground lizard tends to stay within its burrow. This lizard prefers partly exposed and open canopied areas with leaf or tidal litter, loose substrate, and crab burrows. They actively prowl, root and dig for prey. They are opportunistic hunters and will take virtually any prey items they can find. They are known to eat a variety of amphipods, moths, ants, small hermit crabs, and the hatchlings and eggs of anoles.

There is strong evidence that correlates the decline of *A. polops* with the introduction of the small Indian mongoose (*Herpestes auropunctatus*) to the Virgin Islands. The mongoose was introduced in 1884, at which time the decline of the ground lizard probably increased. The extensive development of coastal areas in St. Croix may have also contributed to the decline of this species. An extensive mongoose eradication program has taken place on Buck Island National Park. In 1968 it was believed that mongoose were eradicated and 16 *Ameiva* were introduced to the island. Two years later, 24 *Ameiva* were counted and they had expanded their range inshore and along the beach front from where they were released. This suggested that the introduction, or reintroduction, of *Ameiva* to Buck Island was successful. Unfortunately, the mongoose were not eradicated and when the trapping program stopped the population once again boomed. The ground lizard had again been extirpated from Buck Island by 1974. Part of the current recovery plan for the Ground lizard requires the National Park service to eradicate mongoose from Buck Island to allow the reintroduction of the lizard. Recently, DFW has coordinated a, first time ever, cooperative agreement between USFWS and a private Hotel (Hotel on the Cay) for the conservation and management of an endangered species. Currently students from several middle and high schools are helping restore and maintain the lizard's critical habitat on Protestant Cay.

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 St. Croix Ground Lizards.
2. The Saint Croix Ground Lizard is very valuable to us. They eat invertebrates and other insects that we consider pests. Several *Ameiva* have been observed hunting and eating cockroaches.
3. The only public location you can view the St. Croix Ground Lizard is Protestant Cay in the Christiansted Harbor. With help from local schools we hope to restore and maintain this lizard's critical habitat.
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. If we take care of this lizard, we may be able to attract more visitors to St. Croix. They could be a tourist attraction!
6. 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.
7. For more information on this and other animals in the Virgin Islands please visit our website at:

www.vifishandwildlife.com

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION ON
OUR NATIVE ANIMALS CONTACT**

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