

Introducing the Reptiles!

The family of reptiles is made up of turtles, lizards, snakes, different kinds of crocodiles, and a small group in Southeast Asia called tuataras. Some people think that snakes and lizards are slimy, but all reptiles are covered with dry, horny scales. These scales might be hard to notice for animals like the turtle, whose large scales (or plates) have grown together into one hard shell. Not only have the plates grown together, but the turtle's backbone has also grown into the shell!

All reptiles have to be really aware of how cold or hot they get, for their body temperature depends on the temperature of their surroundings. They spend much of their time doing two things: looking (or waiting) for food, and moving between sunny spots and shady (or wet) spots to warm up or cool off. If a reptile gets too warm, they can get very sick, and if it gets too cool, it is hard for the animal to have enough energy to move to a warmer spot. These warm spots are often the places that you find reptiles: turtles that come out of the water to sit on a rock or tree branch, and lizards that sit on a fence or sunny wall in order to catch the rays of the sun. Sometimes this search for warmth can be dangerous, like the snakes that lie on a warm road at night.

Reptiles have some interesting ways to communicate with each other. People communicate by talking, and reptiles also make all kinds of noises to each other. Baby alligators start chirping just before they hatch from their egg, in order to tell their mother that it is time to dig them out of their dirt nest and bring them to the water. Male alligators can make an enormously loud bellowing noise, kind of like a big engine! They also raise their heads and slap the water loudly with their chins in order to chase other male alligators away. Lizards also chirp and bark at each other, and some male lizards nod to each other, bobbing their heads up and down vigorously. Snakes are generally silent, and use their tongues not to communicate but only to smell. However, a frightened snake will hiss or rattle to as a warning.

How do reptiles defend themselves when they are frightened? The biggest alligators don't have to defend themselves from anyone except man, but smaller alligators are defended by their mothers until they are more than a year old. Many lizards have tails that break off to let the lizard escape when it is in trouble, and another tail regrows later. One lizard even wiggles its tail, breaks it off himself, and the tail continues to wriggle for a few minutes to make the predator go after the tail rather than the lizard. Many frightened snakes will play dead until they think the threat has gone away. The Eastern Hognose snake is among the best at this playacting: when scared, it first flattens its head like a cobra and hisses loudly, then, if it needs to, rolls

over, moves around as if it was wounded, sticks out its tongue, and plays dead.

These fun facts are just a glimpse into a whole world of fascinating behaviors and unusual animals in the reptile family. Find out more information about your favorite reptile at the local library, or on the Internet!