

## Mountain Loop Conservancy Fact Sheet:

### Northwestern Alligator Lizard *Elgaria coerulea principis*

**Range:** The Northwestern Alligator Lizard lives on the west coast of the United States ranging from the tip of northern California, north into British Columbia. They are capable of living from sea level to as high as 10,000 feet (3048 m) in elevation in California, although they cannot survive at higher elevations in the northern area of their range.

**Identification:** Although sometimes dull in appearance, Northwestern Alligator Lizards have distinctive and often bright markings. Their overall colorings come in two varieties; they can be a brown copper color or sometimes a darker black color but they are both the same species. Their sides are always patterned with white, black, and olive markings that appear in a roughly checkered pattern. This pattern is distinct and unique to each individual. Their ventral side is light gray to white in color but only on their belly scales - not their tails. Their tails are a uniform brown color sometimes interrupted by dark black splotches. The easiest way to tell the difference between males and females is their heads. Males have larger triangular-shaped heads that appear more heavily built than the female's smaller, narrower heads. In addition, the males tend to have a grayer color on the sides of their heads particularly during the spring breeding season.



Northwestern Alligator Lizards can be found in sizes ranging from newborns measuring 2.4-3 inches (6-8 cm) long, to large adults who, under good conditions, can exceed 12 inches (30 cm) in length. Alligator lizards never stop growing although their bodies, forelegs to back legs, usually do not exceed 2.4 inches (6 cm). This is because after they reach adulthood only their tails continue to grow. Newborns have solid colors and none of the patterns of adults. However, this changes with their first shedding giving them more distinct colorization.



**Unique Characteristics:** Northwestern Alligator Lizards although sometimes dull in appearance, have many unusual characteristics. They are one of the few species of lizard that gives birth to live young which means the young are protected for a longer period of time while inside the mother. They are born in litters of 2-6 on average over a period of about 1 day. Also unlike some species, adults, particularly the mother, are tolerant of the young and show no sign of the cannibalism observed in other species. Northwestern Alligator Lizards are excellent swimmers, able to swim through the water efficiently enough to avoid predators despite being cold-blooded. They take nearly 3 years to reach full size and slightly less to reach sexual maturity. In addition, because they give birth to live young, females can only breed

every other year as their bodies need an opportunity to recover, unlike egg-laying species who invest fewer resources in their young.

**Habitat and Life Cycle:** Northwestern Alligator Lizards live in a diverse range of environments. A very hardy species of lizard, they can survive almost anywhere there is sufficient warmth, usually small openings or clearings in the forest. They favor rock piles and locations with sun exposure. They often live in meadows but can adapt to human landscaping and construction. However, like many reptiles they are vulnerable to cars and moving vehicles as they are attracted to gravel and packed dirt when warmed by the sun, and may fall prey to car tires.



Northwestern Alligator Lizards feed on a wide variety of invertebrate and some vertebrate species.

Their diet includes beetles, grasshoppers, caterpillars, spiders, snails, slugs, and worms. They also eat small mammals and small lizards. They have been observed feeding on bird eggs and young birds.

Their life cycle begins in early spring when males seek out females for mating. Several months later in late July through early September, the females give birth to live young who are independent of their mother but may stay nearby and are tolerated by adults. The newborns must quickly feed in order to survive the winter. However, they sometimes may not eat for several days after they are born. Further, although hunting is instinctive, youngsters often exhibit lack of control when learning to hunt, allowing their tails to twitch with excitement sometimes warning prey of their presence. After hibernation, the youngsters grow for all of the following summer - growing and shedding quickly to more than double their size. By their second summer, they are nearly full-grown appearing only slightly shorter in the body than full-grown adults do. The following spring the females are mature enough to breed and give birth near their third birthday.



**Conservation Status:** Northwestern Alligator Lizards are not recognized as endangered species due to the lack of wide scale research and their general prevalence. Their adaptability appears to have served them well and they appear to be under no imminent, wide scale threat.

**Interesting Fact:** A common characteristic of Alligator Lizards is the ability to detach their tail in an attempt to escape predators. Once detached the tail writhes on the ground to distract the attacking predator. They grow back a darker colored replacement tail.

**Sources:**

*Alligator Lizard.* (2004). Retrieved March 2011, from The Reptiles of British Columbia : <<http://www.bcreptiles.ca/lizards/alligator.htm>>

*Elgaria coerulea principis - Northwestern Alligator Lizard.* (2011). Retrieved March 2011, from [www.californiaherps.com](http://www.californiaherps.com): <<http://www.californiaherps.com/lizards/pages/e.c.principis.html>>

Personal observations over the last 5 years by Ben Sheppard including documentation of body measurements and behavior.

Prepared by Ben Sheppard for the Mountain Loop Conservancy March 2011 ©

Photographs by Ben Sheppard.

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