

The Crocodile Skink

Check out the New Guinea crocodile skink.

By Mark O'Shea

Distribution: Northern Papua New Guinea including off-shore islands.

Habitat: Coconut plantations and tropical forests near creeks.

Diet: Soft-bodied insects, possibly termites.

Max.length: 88-100mm SVL (192mm TL).

Reproductive strategy: Oviparous with a clutch of 1 egg.

The genus *Tribolonotus* contains eight species from New Guinea to the Solomon Islands but only two species occur on the New Guinea mainland and its continental islands, *T.gracilis* and *T.novaeguineae*, but whether they are separate species or represent geographical populations of the same species, as I am inclined to believe, has yet to be determined.

The crocodile skink is relatively common on Karkar Island and is far more frequently encountered there, in the husk piles, than in forest habitats on the mainland where only five specimens were found under scattered debris along a forest creek. This is a very unusual lizard which differs considerably from the typical smooth scaled, or weakly-keel scaled, and plain (unadorned) 'skink blue-print'. The New Guinea crocodile skink has rugose skin with irregular tuberculate scales and four rows of large, elevated vertebral scales. The head is large and protrudes posteriorly as a slightly spinous casque, especially so in males. Colouration is drab brown, lighter below, with a contrasting orange-red pigmented area of skin around the eye and a yellow ring in the iris. Hatchlings have a pale brown head cap and vertebral stripe.

Curious volar pores are also present on the palmar (palm) and plantar (sole) regions of male New Guinea crocodile skinks, with abdominal glands present in both sexes, though larger in the males.

The purpose of these glands and their secretions has not yet been determined. Female New Guinea crocodile skinks possess two ovaries but only the right oviduct, the result being that an egg developing in the left oviduct must migrate across the body cavity prior to oviposition. Only a single, elongate leathery-shelled egg is laid, incubation taking approximately 60 days.

A further unusual characteristic of the New Guinea crocodile skink is its ability to vocalize, producing an extraordinarily loud sound for such a relatively small species. The ability to vocalize may be increased by an enlarged larynx-like structure in the throat area, again especially pronounced in males.

Crocodile skinks are secretive, they try to escape to cover when disturbed in the coconut husk piles and do not appear to bask, as they have been said to do in captivity.

Sources for more information:

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