



# BOBTAIL SKINK (BOBTAILS)

## TILIQUA RUGOSA



### Synonyms

Sleepy Lizard, Stumpy-tail, Pinecone Lizard and Shingleback.

### Taxonomic Classification

Animalia: Chordata: Vertebrata:  
Reptilia: Squamata (snakes and lizards):  
Scincidae (skinks).

Four subspecies of *T. rugosa* are recognized:

- *T. r. rugosa*: bobtail or western shingleback (WA).
- *T. r. asper*: eastern shingleback (eastern Australia).
- *T. r. konowi*: Rottnest Island bobtail (or shingleback) (Rottnest Island, WA).
- *T. r. palarra*: northern bobtail or Shark Bay shingleback (Shark Bay, WA).

### Description

Bobtails are robust, heavily-armoured large skinks (snout-to-vent length: 31cm; tail-length: 14cm). They have broad triangular-shaped heads featuring a blunt snout. The head tends to be pale orange-brown in colour.

Bobtails have large, fat, non-autonomous tails which are proposed to function as decoys, deflecting attacks from predators away from the head; the tail also stores fat to serve as an energy source during brumation ("reptile hibernation") and drought. The colour of their rugose-scaled body ranges from pale to dark brown, olive, grey, or black.

The back and tail are usually marked with pale blotches or streaks which may coalesce to form crossbands. The limbs and belly tend to be off-white. The Rottnest Island subspecies is smaller and darker. They have robust limbs with 5 digits that bear claws. They have a large blue tongue. Males have a proportionally larger head and stockier body than females, however females grow slightly larger than males.

### Distribution

A widespread species, bobtails are common on the plains west of the Great Dividing Range where rainfall is low, throughout the semi-arid habitats of inland Australia, as well as in coastal parts of Western Australia and South Australia. The Western subspecies is found throughout the southern half of WA, as well as on Garden Island. The Rottnest Island Bobtail is endemic to Rottnest Island.

### Habitat

Bobtails are found in a range of habitats, including coastal dunes, banksia and eucalypt woodlands, and the heavily-timbered Great Dividing Range. The mainland WA subspecies persists in many inner suburbs where pockets of bushland remain.

### Diet

Bobtails are omnivorous, and feed upon a wide range of flowers (they seem to have a special affinity to yellow flowers), fruit, snails, slugs, other invertebrates, and carrion.

### Conservation status

Not evaluated. However, bobtails have a widespread distribution, and appear to be common, and are not considered to be threatened with extinction. Owing to its restricted distribution, the Rottnest Island subspecies is gazetted as Vulnerable.

### Population size and trends

Population densities have been estimated for a number of populations, however no global estimate of the total population size nor population trend has been quantified.





## Life history and reproduction

Bobtails are remarkable for being one of the few reptiles - let alone animals - that are monogamous. A male and female pair-up in early spring for a 6-8 week pairing period before mating in late spring. Following mating, the male and female go their separate ways, reuniting with the same partner the next breeding season. In autumn, females give birth to typically 1 or 2 (but up to 5) well-developed offspring, already 1/3-1/2 as large as adults. Young are independent from birth; no parental care is provided. Sexual maturity is reached at 2-3 years. Bobtails have an estimated lifespan of 20-50 years.

## Behaviour

Bobtails are fairly solitary outside of the breeding season but will tolerate other bobtails. During the breeding season males may compete with each other over mates, which can lead to broken jaws and damaged scales. Whilst fairly placid, when threatened, bobtails attempt to deter harassment by facing the perceived threatening animal (human or otherwise) with their mouth gaping wide, displaying their large blue tongue and hissing aggressively. A bobtail can inflict an extremely painful potentially damaging bite with its powerful jaws.

Bobtails are diurnal. At night and during colder months they shelter under dead vegetation, leaf-litter, logs, rocks, man-made shelters, or in burrows dug by other animals. During winter they become dormant, forgoing foraging as an adaptation for conserving energy. They have a preferred body temperature of 30-35°C, which they achieve by basking in the sun.

## Threats

- Road mortality is a major threat. Bobtails' slow movement and tendency to forage around road verges means many fall victim to being run-over. Studies have found >11% of a population perish from road-kill mortality.
- Predation, especially by cats, but also foxes, dogs, large snakes and predatory birds. Young bobtails are especially vulnerable.
- Loss, degradation and fragmentation of habitat through land-clearing and other human-caused stressors.
- Fire.

- Infection by ectoparasitic ticks.
- Bobtail flu: a highly-infectious disease, which can be fatal. Symptoms include emaciation (evident by a thin, flat tail), lethargy, sneezing, tongue pinkish (rather than bright-blue), sticky clear ocular and nasal discharge.
- Poisoning from ingesting rat and snail baits.

## Support conservation of this species by:

- Keeping pet cats indoors at all times.
- Keeping pet dogs on leashes.
- Fence areas of remnant vegetation to exclude dogs and livestock from predating and destroying bobtail habitat respectively.
- Slowing down on roads, especially in the warmer months when bobtails are most active. Urge Road Authorities to erect signs around areas where bobtails are prevalent, and to reduce road speeds in such areas.
- Urge Road Authorities to install fauna underpasses to allow safe passage across roads and reduce habitat fragmentation and isolation owing to roads bisecting populations.
- To encourage bobtails to your property, plant dense undercover vegetation involving a mix of local, native shrubs, and plants like grasstrees and sword sedges.
- Retain dead vegetation and logs that bobtails use to shelter in. Create shelters for bobtails with corrugated iron or logs. Do not destroy rabbit warrens as these can act as shelters for bobtails.
- Do NOT use rat traps or rat baits or put out snail baits.
- Put barricades around ponds and swimming pools to prevent bobtails entering and drowning.
- Avoid and protest against further land clearing. Restore and replant native vegetation, especially in creating corridors linking habitat.

## Fun Fact

Bobtails are monogamous: partners pair for life - which means partners may be faithful to each other for 30 years!