

FEATURES

Worm lizards, what are they?

RENOIR AUGUSTE

IS IT A worm, is it a lizard, or is it a snake? When most people come across these animals in Trinidad, they are unsure of exactly what they are. Many believe them to be snakes, so out of fear they kill them. Others may think of them as large earthworms and may leave them be. However, they are neither snakes nor earthworms and are in fact a type of legless lizard.

Worm lizards belong to the family Amphisbaenidae. They have elongated bodies, reduced or no limbs, and undeveloped eyes that allow only very rudimentary sight. The tail closely resembles the head and sometimes they use this as a way to confuse potential predators; indeed the word Amphisbaena comes from the Greek 'to go both ways' and this has also led to one of their local names, the "two-headed snake".

There are 180 species of worm lizards worldwide, two of which are found in Trinidad. Firstly, there is the black and white worm lizard (Amphisbaena fuliginosa). Its body is covered with black blotches on a white background. Because of its colour patterns, this is the species that may be mistaken for a snake. It can grow to about 40cm long. Its head is the same width of its body.

The other species of worm lizard that can be found in Trinidad is the white worm lizard (Amphisbaena alba). This species can grow to 60cm long. It has a tan to brown colouration. The



The black and white worm lizard is sometimes mistaken for a coral snake.



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white worm lizard is less often seen compared to the black and white worm lizard, and seems to have a preference for living in or near bachac nests, not just because of the abundance of ants, but also because of the concentration of various other insects, such as beetle larvae, in these habitats. Both species move in a manner quite different to most snakes – shifting forward

(or backwards) with their body straight and their skin moving in an accordion-like fashion. These legless lizards can be found in leaf litter and loose soil in forests here in Trinidad. They can also be found in gardens where moist soil occurs. They typically feed on earthworms and insects in the soil, attributed to their fossorial behaviour. Because of their burrowing, they likely help aerate soil making it more fertile.

Thus, these often unseen and rarely studied lizards likely perform important ecological roles. Perhaps having these legless lizards in our garden can be beneficial towards the growth of healthier plants. Are worm lizards dangerous to people? In short: no. Currently, no species of lizard in Trinidad is known to be venomous. When approached



Close-up of a worm lizard's head,



The white worm lizard is often found near bachac nests.

they tend to burrow into the soil, shying away from contact. They are also rarely seen because they tend to stay in and/or under the surface of soil. They do have teeth and can bite, though their first option would always be to shy away, as people are too big for them to eat and are more likely to be perceived as a predator than prey. In fact when threatened, they bend their body into a stiff horseshoe shape, quivering the tail to distract attention from the head. They also possess hardened skin in order to withstand bites from predators.

So, next time you come across either a white or black and white worm lizard, know that it is not a snake, or worm, but actually a legless lizard which is not only relatively harmless but likely improves the quality of our soil.

For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit www.ttfnc.org or Facebook or YouTube pages. The club's next monthly meeting will be held on June 9 at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain. Lecture: "Searching high and low for TT's anthuriums" by Aidan Farrell, UWI.



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