

LIZARD LIFE

Information from Kapiti Coast District Council and QEII National Trust

It is that time of year when we spend an increasing number of hours working or relaxing in our gardens. We also tend to start major building and landscaping projects. This summer, spare a thought for the skinks and geckos that may have established homes in your slice of paradise.

Although there are 8 species of lizard in the Wellington region, we are most likely to see the Common skink (*Oligosoma nigraplantare polychroma*) in Kapiti gardens. The Common gecko (and in places, the Forest gecko) may also be found on Kapiti properties. Despite the name 'Common', they are still under pressure from new urban development, pests, domestic animals and immaculate gardens.

As the urban belt extends in range, it is possible to create a little habitat for our native birds and lizards along the way. This is especially true for skinks and geckos as they take up very little room, create no noise pollution, do not require the vet and fascinate children when they come out to bask in the sun or search for food.

One of the simple things we can do is plant and mulch thickly. Lizards need good cover for protection from predators such as cats, birds, rodents, stoats and hedgehogs. Native berry and nectar producing plant species are ideal, along with debris forming plants and native climbers to aid in travel on banks and retaining walls (see list below). The mulch will increase humidity and insects as a food source. It has the added benefit of keeping weeds at bay, aiding soil fertility and moisture retention. I also turn used egg cartons upside down under trees. Made of recycled paper and cardboard, they return carbon to the soil and create lizard cover where there is less undergrowth.

Piles or layers of rocks, large stones and logs create small retreat spaces and protection from temperature extremes. You may find that the pile of old concrete and tree prunings you have left in the overgrown corner of the garden is where your family of skink is thriving. If you decide to clear these areas, consider trying to create similar habitat behind a shed, garage or trees.

Small lengths of Onduline (corrugated natural building cladding) or corrugated iron stacked with small lengths of stick or dowel between sheets can create excellent lizard motels. However, these would still need to be used in conjunction with plant cover. Once these habitats are in place, it is best to leave them untouched as lizards are territorial and sensitive to disturbance.

Trapping or poisoning of rats, mice and stoats will be of benefit to lizards, birds, compost and pantries alike. It is best to seek advice from Greater Wellington or the Department of Conservation as to what would be effective and safe in your environment. Domestic and feral cats are major predators of our native lizard and bird species so if you own a cat, keep it well fed and consider ways to increase safe habitat in your garden. Also, it helps to garden organically or minimise the use of herbicides and pesticides.

Be patient, as it may take some time for lizards to discover your efforts to create homes for them. Eventually, you may find them staring at you inquisitively while you have tea and toast on the back step... as they do at my place.

Native Plants for cover and protection

Small leaved pohuehue (*Muehlenbeckia complexa*)
Shrubby tororaro (*Muehlenbeckia astonii*)
Coastal tree daisy (*Olearia solandri*)
Mingimingi (*Coprosma propinqua*)
Thick leaved mahoe (*Melicytus crassifolius*)
Flax (*Phormium cookianum* or *P.tenax*)
Rengarenga lily (*Arthropodium cirratum*)
Shore spurge (*Euphorbia glauca*)
NZ Daphne (*Pimelia prostrata* or *P. arenaria*)
NZ Clematis (*Clematis foetida*, *C. paniculate*, *C. forsteri*)
Kaihua (*Parsonsia heterophylla*, *P. capsularis*)
Climbing rata (*Metrosideros fulgens*, *M. perforata*)
Astelia, fern, tussock, sedge and grass species

Native plants as food source

Nectar:

Rata species (*Metrosideros robusta*, *M.fulgens*)
Flax (*Phormium tenax*, *P. cookianum*)
Mänuka (*Leptospermum scoparium*)
Koromiko (*Hebe stricta* var. *atkinsonii*)

Fruit:

Small leaved pohuehue (*Muehlenbeckia complexa*)
Kawakawa (*Macropiper excelsum*)
Coprosma species (e.g., *Coprosma repens*, *C.propinqua*)
Porcupine shrub (*Melicytus crassifolius*)

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