

# *Tiliqua scincoides*

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Authority: White ex Shaw, 1790.

**Common name:** Eastern Blue Tongue

**Description** (Greer 1989; Cogger 1992; Shea 1998): *Tiliqua scincoides* is one of the largest skinks with a SVL (snout-vent) reaching 400mm. The tail is short and robust, measuring up to 60% of SVL. The limbs are pentadactyl and small with hind legs measuring 20% of SVL. The head is relatively large, bearing strong jaws with a wide gape. There is differentiation in the tooth structure whereby the front teeth are smaller than those along the mid-jaw line. The tongue is large and cobalt blue. Distinguishing scales that separate *T. scincoides* from other *Tiliqua* species are the anterior temporal scales that are large in size. The ear apertures are conspicuous. **Colouration:** *T. scincoides* occurring in the tropical Queensland district lack the temporal (nostril – ear) black band that is characteristic in the southern end of the cline. Colour patterns are varied with some individuals having banded markings and others having blotchy markings. The general colour patterns include a white ventrolateral region, stopping at the dorsoventral scales, in conjunction with a brown-grey dorsolateral surface. The head is a pale brown/ grey and decreasing in intensity posteriorly. Dorsal transverse pale markings as well as oblique dorsolateral black markings interrupt this colouration. Alternating with this arrangement are wide yellow-orange large bands/ blotches. The limbs are tertiary grey. This colour patterning is not unique to the Townsville region and variations do occur in pattern and colour.

**Similar species** (Pers. obs.): *Hemisphaeridon gerrardii* occurs in the Townsville (Mt. Spec) region and resembles *T. scincoides* in the head region and the general size. Distinguishing features for *H. gerrardii* include the possession a pink tongue in as well as a thinner prehensile tail (50% of total length), longer limbs in relation to body size and longer digits, as this species is partially arboreal.

**Range** (Greer 1989; Cogger 1992; Shea 1998): *T. scincoides* has an extensive range and occurs from Broome in WA through the Northern Territory, to Cape York in North Queensland, down the east coast of Queensland and extending through NSW, Vic, and east SA. *T. scincoides* is not common in Townsville and is rare on Magnetic Island (Fearn, pers. comm.).

**Ecology and Behaviour** (Greer 1989; Cogger 1992; Bauer 1993): *T. scincoides* occurs in a wide range of habitats and is found in seasonally wet and dry savannah woodlands, coastal heathlands, in montaine wet sclerophyll woodlands and the fringes of rainforests. These animals have poorly developed limbs and are unable to dig their own burrows. They therefore rely on burrows of other animals, or seek shelter in hollow logs, in ground debris (leaf litter) and in rock crevices. Blue tongues are solitary and largely diurnal by habit. As ectotherms they maintain a body temperature of 30- 35 C when active. In cold temperatures they remain in shelters and emerge to bask when weather conditions are favourable. *T. scincoides* have a habit of folding their hind limbs alongside the tail base in thick grass where they move by lateral undulations.

**Diet:** *T. scincoides* are not an agile group and therefore rely on prey that is much slower than themselves. Their diet is typically omnivorous and consists of invertebrates (snails and insects), vertebrates (carrion amongst other food-types), as well as flowers, wild berries and native fruits. Their jaw muscles are well developed and their teeth are adapted for crushing.

**Displays:** When threatened Blue tongues open their mouth wide and protrude their large bright blue tongue. This is accompanied by other threat displays that include hissing and an increase in body size by dorsoventral flattening resulting in widening of flanks. They also increase their height by arching their bodies and leaning to one side to face aggressor.

**Reproductive biology** (Greer 1989; Bauer 1993; Shea 1998): For most of the year *T. scincoides* are solitary. During spring (Sept-Nov) females enter their oestrous phase and are courted by males. Any male-male encounters are usually aggressive and can involve combat. During mating the male will grasp the female's head or back with his teeth. This can leave scratches and cuts. Mate guarding after copulation by the male has been reported for periods of up to 25 days. Gestation period is approximately 100 days. *T. scincoides* are viviparous (live bearing) and embryos have placental matter that is similar to that of mammals. Litter size varies, but on average between 10 -20 individuals each measuring 130-140mm (total length) and weighing between 10 and 20g are born every one to two years. No form of parental care is present in this group and the neonates are precocious from the onset. Once born they ingest their placental membranes. A few days later they shed their first skin and disperse. Adulthood is attained at 3 years of age. *T. scincoides* are long lived often reaching over 25 years in captivity.

#### References:

- Bauer, A.M. 1993. Lizards. pp. 564- 611 in H.G. Cogger, E. Gould, J. Forshaw, G. McKay and R.G. Zweifel (eds). *Encyclopedia of Animals*. Premiere Books, Auckland, New Zealand.
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