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Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by Pearl Roberts

Northwestern Alligator Lizard

She's a bird-lover, but she can't resist things that slither. She'll chase a garter snake and play with it, although she's never actually killed one. So the day I saw our cat with a lizard minus a tail, I knew something was wrong.

"How could you!" said Roger, as he picked up the damaged creature and took it into the garden. "That's horrible!" I said as the lizard blinked at me, mortified but still functional. "Fancy that!" thought Missy, as her prey escaped under a rock.

I thought that Missy had acquired a taste for lizard parts until I learned that dropping their tails is actually a lizard defence mechanism. They leave the writhing tail on the ground to distract a predator and enable a quick getaway. Amazingly, the tail regenerates, albeit shorter and fatter. The process of tail-dropping is called autotomy.

I've often admired these pretty brown lizards sunning themselves on the rocks. At a maximum length of 20 cm, they are delicate with tiny arms and legs. You might spot the fold of skin on each side, which allows them to expand after a tasty meal or when carrying eggs or live young. Alligator lizards (*Elgaria coerulea principis*) spend the winter hibernating and pop up like dandelions on a summer's day. Secretive by nature, they will hide away for hours if threatened by a predator or a curious human.

Their mating habits are less than charming however. The males don't bother with courtship – they simply chase down a likely female and clamp her in their jaws

while they mate – sometimes for hours. In late summer, the female gives birth to five or six live offspring. The process of carrying her young depletes her fat reserves, and female alligator lizards only mate every two years so they can regain their strength.

Alligator lizards are fairly common on the BC coast and in the interior, which is at the northern end of their range. They love rocky outcrops and grassy openings scattered with debris, so islands like ours provide excellent habitat. They are often found in proximity to garter snakes – risky business since snakes will eat them. Alligator lizards don't travel far from home; their summer range is usually very close to where they hibernate during the winter, their hibernacula.

They eat large insects, like beetles, grasshoppers, spiders and snails. And caterpillars – good defence against our island invasions.

Although we only glimpse alligator lizards occasionally because of their shy nature, they are in fact prevalent in BC and not in danger of extinction. However, landscaping and rock removal destroy their habitat. So if you want to keep lizards in your yard, think twice before rearranging their furniture.

As for Missy, we found out she now likes Fancy Feast (with gravy) and hope she stays away from lizard tails this summer.

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Natural Mysteries

Last month's mystery was: Where do oystercatchers go at high tide? These black shorebirds with the striking red bills will retreat up the rocky beach to wait out the tide, if the upper beach is suitable habitat. They won't move into the woods if the near shore is forested, however, and in that case

they'll fly off to a shoreline with rocky shelves above the high tide line. Often they will fly to small offshore rocky islets to rest and wait for the tide to fall.

This month's Natural Mystery: What is that white, sudsy stuff that accumulates along stream edges?

Have an answer? Send your thoughts to galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com. Have a Natural Mystery of your own? Let us know, and we'll try to answer it.

THE GALIANO NATURALISTS are a group of curious explorers who enjoy observing, marveling, and sharing information about the natural world around us. Come join us. Visit our website at <http://gulfnet.sd64.bc.ca/GalianoNaturalists.html>.