

Nature Note:

We had an unusual house guest this autumn. When the study door was open on a sunny day my wife glimpsed a quicksilver movement along the skirting. A mouse? Although she didn't stand on a chair, our culture still generally demands that the male partner deals with such invaders, so I rootled around on my hands and knees to investigate. To our joint pleasure, however, it turned out to be a lovely green lizard, venturing in from the garden to lick up a few insects and spiders that had also strayed indoors. It didn't get far enough into the house to become a proper lounge lizard (sorry, couldn't stop myself), but it did seem quite at home. Then we also spotted a couple of young ones scaling the wall outside with their sticky-pad feet, so we were clearly blessed with a whole family.

Those young lizards will have had to learn fast. The scientific name of the lizard is *Zootoca vivipara*, which means 'bearing live young'. Some reptiles lay eggs, which hatch out rather like birds' eggs, but lizards just drop their young off in a sort of membrane and leave them to break out and fend for themselves straight away. Lizards do best in the warmer south of the country, because they have no means of heating themselves from within, but rely on basking in the sun and recharging their batteries that way. That means they have to hibernate in winter, staying torpid under stones or in holes from about October to March, to emerge again blinking in the spring sunshine. Blinking and winking is something they are rather good at, in fact. They have three separate eye-lids, one on top, one below and one to the side of the eye, which slides across ('nictitates' is the technical term). They also have an acute sense of smell. When they are darting out their long tongues, they are sensing the world around them in a sort of combination of tasting, smelling and touching for which we have no human equivalent.

Many people instinctively recoil from snakes, but we tend to find lizards rather cute. And we find their distant reptilian cousins, the dinosaurs (the name means 'terrible lizards'), positively fascinating. Children as young as five will know their T Rex from their Diplodocus and their Stegosaurus from their Triceratops; they buy soft toys of them, dote on films and books about them, and gaze with wonderment at their huge skeletons in museums. Is it that we know deep down that they are 65 million years long gone and no longer a threat, safe to be treated as monsters of the imagination only?

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The lizard's cousin

Contributed