

# EKOKIDS: SCHOOLYARD NATURE GUIDES



EXTENSION



*Mammals*



*Trees*



*Invertebrates*



*Reptiles &  
Amphibians*



*Birds*



*Fish*

# Reptiles & Amphibians

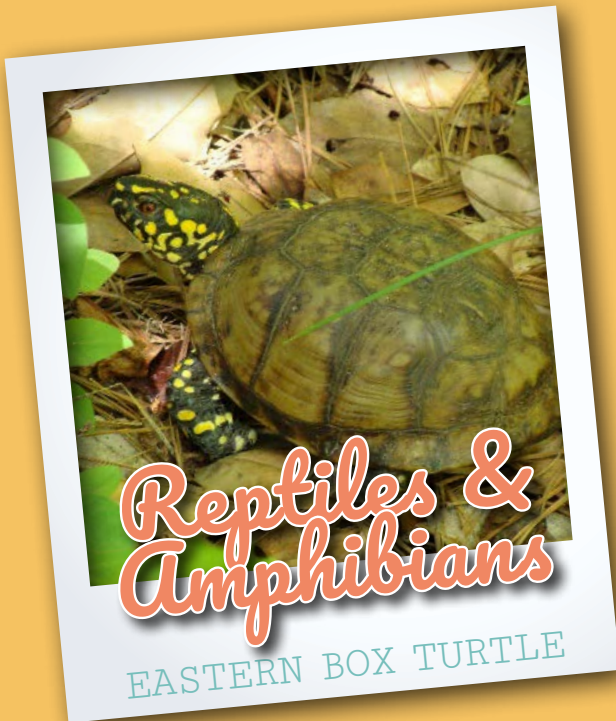


Reptiles and amphibians are often-unappreciated members of nature and local biodiversity. Many people do not know these animals have important roles in pest management and as indicators of environmental health.

Reptiles are cold-blooded vertebrates with rough, dry, scaly skin. Although some species, such as alligators and smooth-shelled turtles, live in water, all reptiles lay hard-shelled eggs on land. Reptiles include snakes, turtles, lizards, skinks, and alligators.

In contrast, amphibians generally have smooth, moist skin. All amphibians lay their eggs in the water, even though they may spend their adult life on land. Frogs, toads, salamanders, and newts are examples of amphibians.





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## Eastern Box Turtle

(*Terrapene carolina*)

### DESCRIPTION

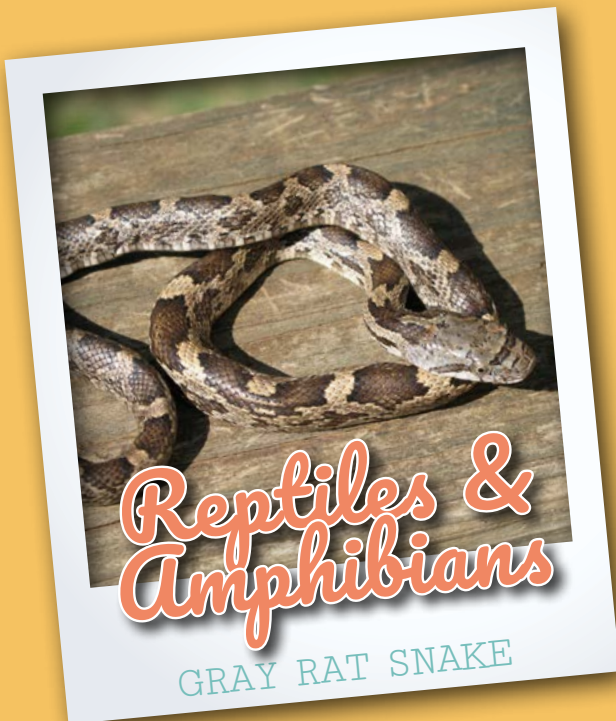
- Reptile with a hinged bottom shell plate that allows for complete closure of the shell, similar to a box
- Brown upper shell patterned with yellow or orange spots
- Red eyes on males; yellowish-brown eyes on females

### HABITAT

The **eastern box turtle** is native to the U.S. and can most frequently be seen in hardwood forests, brushy grasslands, and wet meadows.

### FUN FACTS

- **Eastern box turtles** are long-lived vertebrates capable of living 100 years or more.
- Urban development and habitat loss have caused serious population declines of this species.



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## Gray Rat Snake

(*Pantherophis spiloides*)

### DESCRIPTION

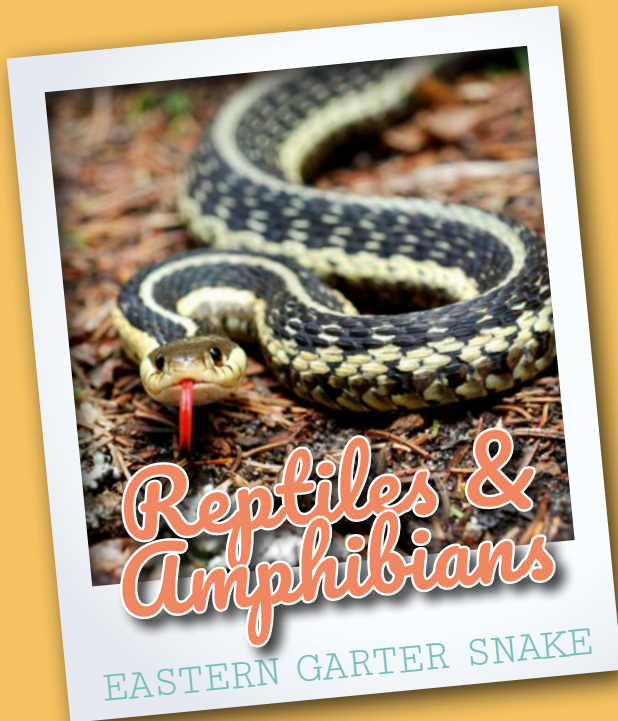
- Other name: chicken snake
- Larger species of nonvenomous constrictor
- Average length: 39–72 inches
- Dark gray, oval-shaped blotches mark a lighter gray background

### HABITAT

The **gray rat snake** is native to the U.S. It prefers forests and forest-edge habitats and is frequently seen in barns and sheds, where it feeds on mice and other rodents.

### FUN FACTS

- **Gray rat snakes** will release a foul-smelling scent to deter a potential predator.
- **Gray rat snakes** are excellent climbers, capable of using rough bark to scale trees to find food and shelter.



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## Eastern Garter Snake

(*Thamnophis sirtalis*)

### DESCRIPTION

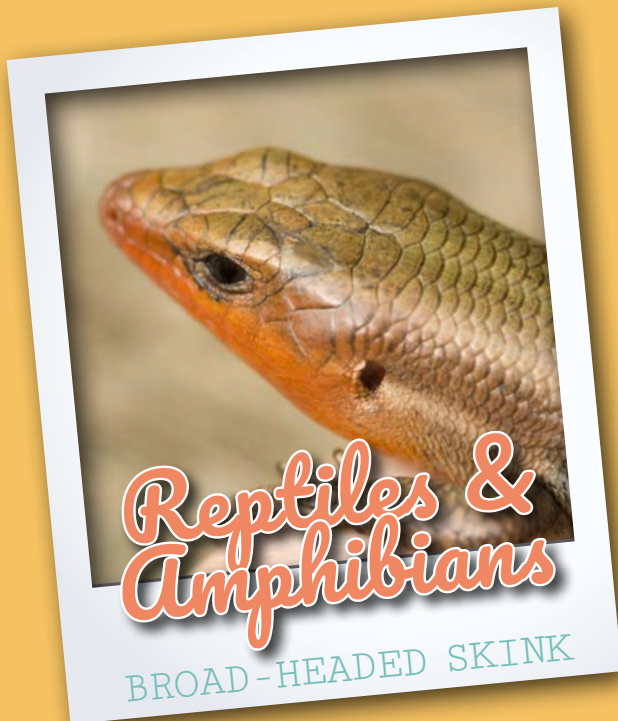
- Medium-sized, nonvenomous reptile
- Females usually larger than males; average length for both: 18–26 inches
- Base color ranges from green to brown to black
- Characteristic white-yellow stripes run the length of the body

### HABITAT

Native to the U.S., **eastern garter snakes** use moist habitats such as shrubby fields, pond edges, drainage ditches, and marshes where they can find salamanders, frogs, earthworms, and other small prey.

### FUN FACT

The **eastern garter snake** is so named because the stripes reminded early biologists of the stripes on garter straps.



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## Broad-Headed Skink

(*Plestiodon laticeps*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Other name: broadhead skink
- Largest skink in the southeastern U.S.; length: 6–13 inches
- A set of wide jaws gives this reptile's head a broad, triangular appearance
- Males: dark olive-brown with orange head during the breeding season (see photo); females: uniformly brown with five stripes running from head to tail

### HABITAT

The **broad-headed skink** is a native, tree-dwelling (arboreal) reptile found across the southeastern and south-central U.S., most frequently in humid hardwood forests or woodland edges.

### FUN FACT

Male **broad-headed skinks** use their tongues to detect scents (pheromones) given off by females during breeding season.





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## Five-Lined Skink

(*Plestiodon fasciatus*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Medium-sized reptile; length: 5-8 inches
- Juveniles: dark brown-black base color with five white-yellow stripes along the length of the body; bright blue tail
- Adults: uniformly tan-brown with dark band running lengthwise along the sides; no blue tail (see photo)

### HABITAT

This native lizard is one of the most common in North America. It prefers partially wooded habitats, but it is often seen near buildings in neighborhoods and on farms.

### FUN FACT

**Five-lined skinks**, like many other lizards, can disconnect their tails to distract potential predators and make their escape.



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## American Toad

(*Anaxyrus americanus*)

### DESCRIPTION

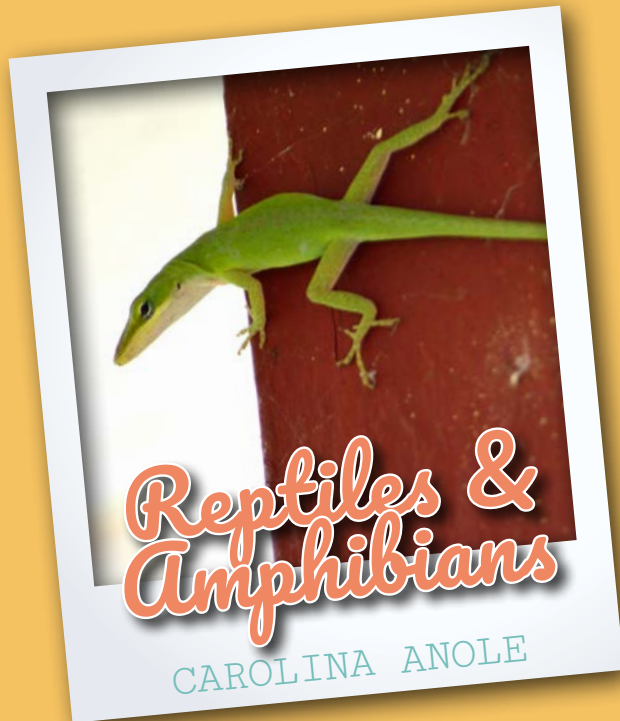
- Medium-sized amphibian; average length: 2-3½ inches
- Skin color ranges from yellowish-brown to gray
- Many have spots or large speckling on their backs
- Wart-like bumps cover the skin

### HABITAT

The American toad is native to Mississippi and can most frequently be observed near areas of standing fresh water, such as ponds or even swimming pools.

### FUN FACTS

- **American toads** are most active during times of gentle to moderate rain because they eat worms and other ground insects that come to the top of damp soil.
- Contrary to the myth, **American toads** cannot cause warts in people.



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## Carolina Anole

(*Anolis carolinensis*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Other names: green anole; American chameleon
- Male length: 5–8 inches; females 15 percent smaller
- Most (60–70 percent) of this reptile's length is tail
- Upper body from green to medium brown; white belly
- Males extend their red throats in display to other males

### HABITAT

The **Carolina anole** is a native southeastern reptile frequently seen on the warm sides of buildings. They prefer trees, shrubs, and forested habitats.

### FUN FACT

Although the **Carolina anole** can change color, it is not a true chameleon and is more closely related to iguanas.



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## Green Treefrog

(*Hyla cinerea*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Strikingly colored, slim-bodied amphibian
- Length: 1½–2½ inches; females slightly larger than males
- Bright green (sometimes gray) upper body with gold-white markings near jaws, sides, and legs; pale bellies
- Smooth skin
- Sticky pads on the ends of long toes

### HABITAT

Like most amphibians native to the southeastern U.S., **green treefrogs** are found in wet habitats such as ponds, lakes, and marshes. They prefer areas with floating or rooted plants where they can find insects to eat and cover from predators.

### FUN FACTS

**Green treefrogs** prefer to climb rather than jump away from threats.



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## Gray Treefrog

(*Hyla versicolor*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Small amphibian
- Length: 1¼–2 inches; females slightly larger than males
- Warty, mottled light gray on upper body; pale belly; orange-yellow markings under the thighs
- Can change skin color for camouflage
- Sticky pads on the ends of long toes

### HABITAT

This native eastern U.S. treefrog species lives in moist, deciduous forests and swamps where it can find moths, flies, beetles, grasshoppers, and other food in the tree branches.

### FUN FACT

**Gray treefrogs** spend nearly their entire lives in trees, coming down to the ground to breed in ponds and other quiet waters during the spring-to-summer breeding season.



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## Spotted Salamander

(*Ambystoma maculatum*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Other name: yellow-spotted salamander
- Larger amphibian; length: 6–9 inches
- Dark black, brown, gray, or green base color; light pink-gray belly
- Named for two uneven rows of yellow spots running from head to tail

### HABITAT

The spotted salamander is native to Mississippi and can most frequently be observed in hardwood forest areas with shallow pools.

### FUN FACTS

- **Spotted salamanders** can grow (regenerate) a new copy of a damaged body part.
- **Spotted salamanders** can release a toxic liquid from poison glands on their backs and necks if they feel threatened.





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## Southern Leopard Frog

(*Lithobates sphenoccephalus*)

### DESCRIPTION

- Larger amphibian; length: 2–3½ inches
- Green-tan upper body and light belly
- Named for dark brown spots on the head, back, and legs
- Webbed hind feet and toes lacking sticky pads

### HABITAT

Southern leopard frogs, native to the eastern U.S., live in shallow, freshwater wetlands such as swamps, lakes, ponds, and ditches where they breed and feed on insects.

### FUN FACT

Southern leopard frogs, like other frogs and toads, have backbones but no ribs.

For more information on common wildlife and plants or incorporating nature into the classroom, please contact [Leslie.Burger@msstate.edu](mailto:Leslie.Burger@msstate.edu) or (662) 325-6686.

EkoKids is produced by the Mississippi State University Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Aquaculture and the MSU Extension Service for use by educators and youth leaders.

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Publication 3044–D (05-24)

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Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. ANGUS L. CATCHOT JR., Director

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