

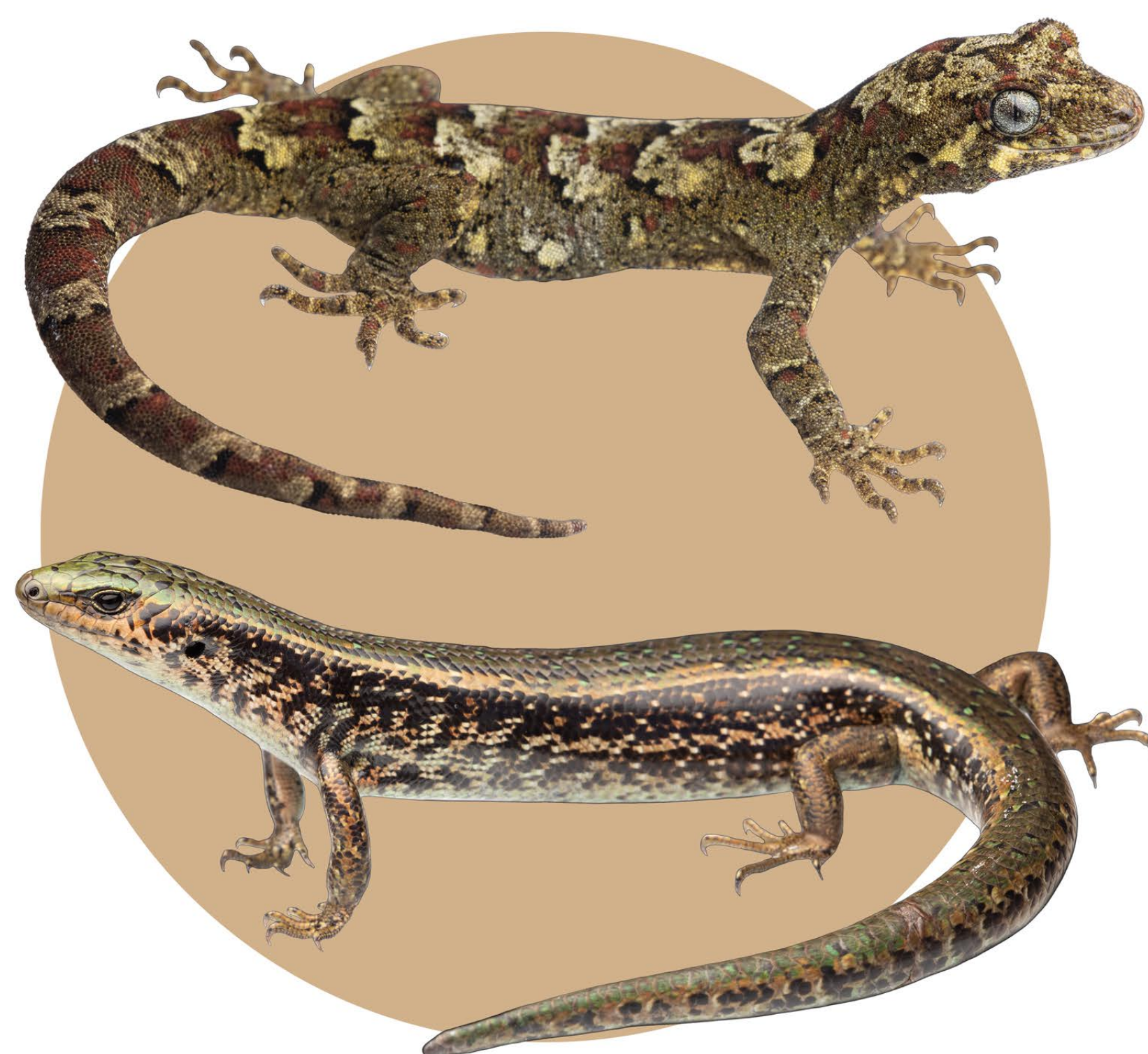
Tuatara

(*Sphenodon punctatus*)



are not

Lizards

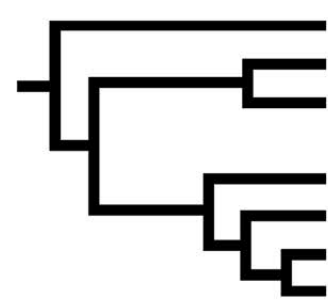


Tuatara —
found only in
Aotearoa New Zealand
— is the last surviving
species of an ancient
reptile lineage that once
thrived during the age
of dinosaurs.

Order Rhynchocephalia

1 species worldwide

Tuatara is the sole survivor of
this otherwise fossilised group of
Triassic-aged reptiles.



The ancestors of tuatara
split off from squamates
(lizards and snakes)
about
260 million years ago.

Order Squamata

> 125 species in New Zealand

In present-day New Zealand, this
group is represented by geckos,
skinks, and marine snakes.

Eggs

Female tuatara nest once every
~2-9 years and typically lay about
8 leathery eggs (clutch sizes can
range from 1 - 17 eggs). These take
10 - 16 months to hatch.

Hatchlings take at least 10 years
to mature and they may live
for more than >130 years!



**Tuatara have a rare
form of temperature-
dependent sex
determination** —
in which eggs from warmer
nests produce male
hatchlings, whereas cooler
nests yield females.

Live young

All New Zealand lizards
give birth to live young
except for the egg-laying skink
(*Oligosoma suteri*). Female skinks
bear 1 - 10 offspring and geckos
give birth to twins. Some of our
geckos can live for more than
>60 years and skinks >40 years.



Unusual anatomy

Tuatara have 'acrodont' teeth that
are fused to the upper surfaces of
their jawbones, whereas most
lizards have 'pleurodont' teeth
that rest in sockets on the inner
sides of their jawbones. Tuatara
also have a fused bony structure
(lower temporal bar) closing the
bottom of the large opening
(temporal fenestra) behind each
eye socket (this is open in lizards).



Tuatara has a single row
of lower teeth that fits
between two rows of teeth
on the upper jaw. **This
unusual anatomy
produces a specialised
shearing action** when
tuatara feeds — perfect for
tearing through armoured
insects and seabirds.

Body size

New Zealand lizards are
significantly smaller than
tuatara. Our largest lizards can
attain a total length of about 35-cm
(snout-vent length of 165 mm)
and can weigh about 115 grams.
Wild tuatara can reach a
total length of about 75-cm
(200-280 mm snout-vent length)
and can weigh up to 1 kg!

