



Lacerta lapida

Written & illustrated by H. G. B. Gilpin

TO MY MIND, by far the most magnificent of European lizards is the Ocellated or Eyed Lizard, *Lacerta lepida*. Rivalling the brilliant green of the Jersey Lizard, *Lacerta viridis*, its back and sides are further ornamented with circular markings reminiscent of the "eyes" on a peacock's tail. Furthermore it has the dignity of size, commonly reaching two feet in length and exceptionally thirty two inches.

My first encounter with the species was on a visit

to Spain. We were driving away from Lake Medina where amongst the grass at the water's edge we found many beautiful little green Tree Frogs, *Hyla hylarum*, and a big green Marsh Frog, *Rana ridibunda*, when we saw a dead Ocellated Lizard lying in the middle of the road. It was a fine specimen, sixteen inches long with broad blue patches standing out vividly against the green of its sides. We often found dead reptiles on the less frequently used roads in

Spain but in a country so rich in predatory birds the corpses were very quickly salvaged.

On one occasion we saw a Black Kite swoop down and seize a snake in its talons only a few score yards in front of the car. Shortly afterwards we saw three large terrapins, *Clemmys leprosa*, basking on the muddy bank of a roadside ditch. They were far more nervous than most of the smaller examples of their race met with in vivaria and "plopped" into the water before we could vacate the car.

My next view of an Ocellated Lizard under natural conditions occurred the following year when visiting Portugal. We were walking through the Foros do Arras, across rough ground between the cork oaks, and came to a pool beside the track. Not far from the water two immature Ocellated Lizards, each about sixteen inches long, were basking in the sun. Alerted by our approach, they quickly disappeared into the undergrowth.

The following day, not far from Castello de Vide, we drew off the track and walked through a farm not far from the Portuguese Spanish border. The surrounding land was largely barren, covered with rough grass and many enormous boulders. On a partially clear space, posed like a stone image, was a large Ocellated Lizard all of twenty four inches in overall length. For several seconds it remained immobile, head raised, front legs stiffly erect and body held rigidly tense. Then it flashed across the ground and disappeared into a horizontal crevice between two big boulders.

Congratulating myself that there was ever possibility of securing it for at least temporary examination, I hastened towards its retreat. My enthusiasm for handling the animal underwent a marked diminution as I examined its refuge. The opening, amply large enough to admit a hand, allowed sufficient light to enter to give me a clear view of the lizard, pressed against the wall at the far end with its head facing outwards and a malevolent gleam in its eyes.

It was a superb specimen, very heavily built, with a head two inches across at its widest part. It was the head that reduced my hope of grasping the animal in my bare hands to vanishing point. Remembering, however, the many times I had picked up lizards with menacing mouths and dangerous looking jaws perfectly safely in vivaria, I decided to test the situation further. To this end I secured a long stick, varying from a half to one inch in diameter and very gently eased it forwards until it was just in front of the lizard's head. A quick snap of its jaws, which completely severed the end of the stick, convinced me that no attempt to capture a fully adult member of the species should be made without proper equipment. Guy Mountfort's description of Eyed Lizards as ferocious seemed well merited.

This specimen was beautifully coloured, basically

green with the top of its massive head infused with brown. Its brownish-green back was laced with green and yellow lines and plentifully bejewelled with "eye-like" markings. Its legs, tail and sides were a brighter green, that of the sides marked with arresting vivid blue patches, rimmed with black. The long tapering tail occupied some two thirds of its total length.

Ocellated Lizards are largely ground dwelling but sometimes climb upwards into bushes and trees. They are active fast moving creatures and tremendous jumpers, capable of clearing five feet in a horizontal leap.

Under pressure they have been known to jump down from a height of sixteen feet, when escaping from an enemy in a tree, without apparent injury.

They feed upon insects, mice, birds, eggs, snakes and lizards and are said to take some fruit. They do a great deal of damage to ground nesting birds and have been seen dragging chicks, sitting birds and half-grown rabbits from their holes. Breeding colonies of Bee-eaters have been found with innumerable tracks of Ocellated Lizards around the nesting burrows.

I have seen Ocellated Lizards offered for sale on occasion but have so far resisted the temptation to buy them. Their carnivorous and cannibalistic habits are a disadvantage in confinement. Their willingness and ability to inflict an unpleasant bite also reduces their suitability for inclusion in vivaria. The bite is not poisonous, of course, but the saliva around the teeth can be toxic and the development of a septic condition around a wound is not unknown. Ditmars describes them as hardy in confinement, however, and with adequate accommodation they would indubitably prove uncommonly interesting.

FOOD FOR SOME!

By Hilary Maynard

My 1st is in HOOP but not in KEG,
My 2nd is in ANKLE and also in LEG.
My 3rd is in PARIS but not in ROME,
My 4th is in FAIRYLAND and also in GNOME.
My 5th is in MANLINESS and also in MALE,
My 6th is in YORKSHIRE but not in DALE.
My 7th is in EXPERIMENT but not in PROOF,
My 8th is in ANVIL but not in HOOV.
My 9th is in PLANET but not in MARS,
My 10th is in WEATHER but not in STARS.
My 11th is in NUMEROUS but not in MANY,
My 12th is in WHERE but not in ANY.
My last is in MUG but not in DISH,
My whole are quite liked by Paradise Fish!

Answer on page 312