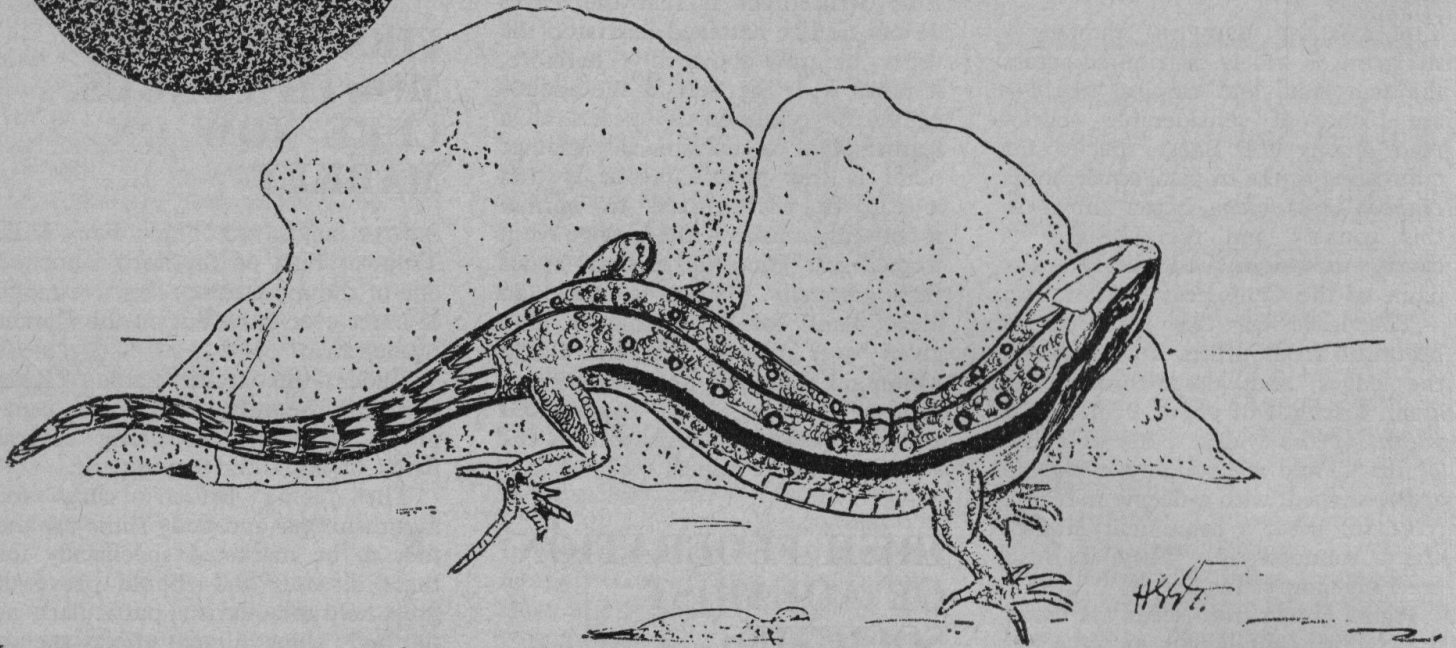


KEEPING AND BREEDING

Lacerta vivipara

by H. G. B. Gilpin, B.Sc.



I HAVE KEPT A CONSIDERABLE number of these charming little lizards and bred them successfully on a number of occasions. From six to eight inches long, the Viviparous Lizard, although not vividly coloured, is a shapely and attractive creature. The basic colour, though variable, is greenish brown to medium or dark brown on the upper surface with a broad, dark band through the eyes and along the sides. A similar but narrower line, bordered on each side by a row of lighter spots, passes down the centre of the back.

The males are rather smaller than the females and have orange underparts, sometimes spotted with black. The underparts of the females are usually grey, yellow or yellowish green. This is not an entirely reliable method of distinguishing between the sexes as a number of females I caught in the Swiss Alps all had clear orange abdomens. There was no doubt about their sex as some of them subsequently produced young. The presence of a swelling near the base of the tail in males, which is absent in females, produces a more certain method of differentiation.

The abdomen, as with other members of the *Lacertidae*, is covered with small, rectangular scales. The scales of the tail, which is a little longer than the head and body, are elongated and arranged in transverse rings. Many species of lizards shed their tails when in danger of capture but the Viviparous Lizard seems to do so more readily than most and, if they must be handled, particular care and gentleness are essential.

The only reptile to be found in Ireland, the Viviparous Lizard is frequently encountered in this country and widely distributed in central and northern Europe.

They are at home on sunny banks, in fields, open spaces in woods and marshy ground and are frequently to be found in the neighbourhood of water. Once established in an area they are likely to remain there for many years. In this country they are commonly seen on roadside verges and railway embankments; in Ireland I found them on stony, heath-covered ground, within a stone's throw of the sea and in Switzerland

I saw them in considerable numbers amongst the low growth at the edge of forest tracks or sunning themselves on fallen timbers. In Switzerland, too, many were met with along the banks of fast-running streams and among the huge boulders dotting the sheltered mountain valleys, 4,000 ft. and more above sea level, no great distance below the snow line. Incidentally, apart from a single, very large slowworm, Viviparous Lizards were the only reptiles I saw in Switzerland.

As vivarium inmates Viviparous Lizards have many advantages. They are good-tempered creatures and may be kept safely in mixed groups of males and females. Their non-aggression also extends to other species of comparable size. They soon become tame and spend most of their time in the open parts of their quarters where they can be seen. Although fairly active they do not require a great deal of room and their tolerance of moderately damp conditions means that it is possible to ornament the vivarium with living foliage.

A pleasant appearance can be achieved by covering the greater part of the floor of the vivarium with moss, embedded in an inch or so of leaf mould, and filling in the remainder with a layer of rounded gravel. A few large "rocks" placed on this gravel will provide opportunities for the lizards to sprawl out and bask on their surfaces. A few flowering plants—African Violets are particularly satisfactory — arranged along the back wall is a worthwhile addition. It is advisable to stand the pots in small trays to prevent undue moisture seeping out into the moss and gravel. A strip of rough bark laid across the front of the pots disguises them effectively and provides the lizards with a climbing area of which they are not slow to take advantage.

A water vessel must be supplied as Viviparous Lizards drink freely. Some also like to submerge themselves in the water lying for several hours with just the head above the surface.

They will feed upon most insects small enough for them to swallow, including newly hatched locusts, flies, blowfly maggots, butterflies, grasshoppers and winged ants. Spiders are eaten with enthusiasm and small mealworms form a welcome addition to the menu. Some will eat small earthworms and slugs but many decline to show any interest in either.

Viviparous Lizards are not difficult to breed in captivity. As their name indicates, the young are born alive although occasionally eggs are produced. When this happens they hatch immediately. The newly born lizards are one inch to one and a half inches in length and black in colour. After a month they begin to assume the brown coloration of the adults, the tail being the last part of the body to change.

Growth is rapid provided abundant supplies of food are available. On several occasions I have obtained six baby lizards at a single birth and at times as many as eight. Since these have invariably arrived in July or August, it has usually been possible to provide them with adequate amounts of small animal life. At this time of the year most gardens are infested with more aphides than their owners consider desirable. These, together with ant larvae, tiny spiders and newly born woodlice, are taken

by the baby lizards with avidity. Clumps of newly dug moss contain a wealth of minute living creatures and when introduced to the vivarium provide an excellent reserve of food. If the vagaries of the English summer cause shortage of natural foods from the garden, the babies will feed freely on fruit flies, day-old stick insects and very tiny mealworms. These can all be bred under controlled conditions and are invaluable foods for many species of lizards during the earliest stages of their lives.

Care should be taken to remove the young lizards as soon as possible after they are born to fresh quarters, away from their parents who will show no hesitation in hunting them down and eating them. After producing half a dozen or so young ones the females are very much reduced in condition, with folds of loose skin along their sides, and they need especially careful treatment. They must be given ample amounts of food, in as wide variety as possible, if they are to survive.

Since pairing amongst these lizards normally takes place in May or June, it is not unusual for females caught in July and August to present their owner with a family. I brought back a large female last August from Switzerland in a cellophane bag perforated with pin holes and half filled with dry moss. On reaching home and opening the bag I discovered that she had produced eight fine babies, all of which were in good condition and extremely lively.

Although not essential, I like to provide the babies with a minimum temperature of 60°F as this keeps them active and encourages them to feed. At this stage, too, their water pot should be shallow with gently sloping sides. I have known them to creep into a steep-walled water vessel at night and, being unable to extricate themselves, drown before morning.

In the wild Viviparous Lizards hibernate in this country from October to March but in indoor vivaria I prefer to provide them with sufficient heat to keep them awake and feeding. This does not apply to lizards kept out of doors where adequate provision has been made for them to retreat below ground level beyond all danger from frost.

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by Phillip Brown

AFTER HAVING KEPT ordinary tropical fish for several years I decided to branch out into the hobby of Tropical Marine Fishkeeping as many other aquarists seem to be doing today. The first thing I proceeded to do was to become confused. Deciding to set about this difficult hobby with care and attention, I bought two books on this new hobby, namely, "Coral Fishes" by T. Ravensdale and the "Marine Aquarium" by Wolfgang Wickler. This sounded splendid. Here for a couple of pounds I had acquired the knowledge of two great specialists, but reading through the books I found out a very important thing; they disagreed with each other. T. Ravensdale was in favour of an expensive rust-proof, corrosion-proof aquarium with massive filters on the outside of the aquarium, churning water through them at 100 gallons per hour with ozone being continuously pumped through a protein skimmer which looked like it was worth 12s. 6d. but turned out to cost £3. W. Wickler, however, did not need all this; all he wanted me to get was a watertight container, a solution of salts, a hydrometer, some aeration, a few rocks, adequate illumination, a filter with nylon wool and some heating. Because I was still at school at the time and only earning 30s. a week with about £3 saved up, I decided to compromise and bought a 20-inch bow-fronted plastic aquarium and a Gro-Well bubble-up filter. I put a plastic-bunged heater in the corner, some coral and rocks on the base of silver sand, a thermostat on the outside and an aerator and pump which necessitated me budgeting my earnings for a good week or two. But in the cause of amateur science I carried on and bought two ten-gallon packs of Tropic-Marin, one for the water of the tank and one as a standby.