

# Plague skinks:

(aka rainbow skinks)

## a threat to our native fauna



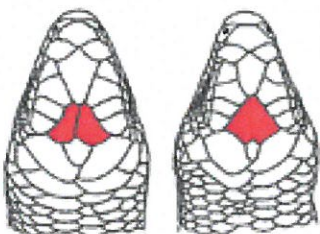
Plague skink adult.  
Photo: Tony Whitaker.

Plague skink eggs amongst gravel. Photo: ozwildlife.

### What are plague skinks?

The plague skink (*Lampropholis delicata*) is a small lizard introduced to New Zealand from Australia. Plague skinks are brown or grey-brown, and have a dark brown stripe along each side of their bodies and an iridescent rainbow-like or metallic sheen in bright light. They are also known as rainbow skinks.

Although smaller than native skinks (3–4 cm from nose to hind legs), they do look very similar. However, plague skinks have a single large scale on the top of their heads, while New Zealand native skinks have two smaller scales.



Native skink (left),  
Plague skink (right). Note  
the large central scale on  
the plague skink head.  
Drawing: Tony Whitaker.

### Why are plague skinks a threat?

Plague skinks reproduce rapidly—laying up to 8 eggs three times per year (more than five times as fast as most native lizards)—and mature in less than half the time of native lizards. They can reach high population densities in a relatively short time, competing with native lizards and other native fauna for food and habitat, and increasing predation pressure on native invertebrates.

Plague skinks are Unwanted Organisms under the Biosecurity Act 1993. It is illegal to knowingly move, spread, release, breed, display or sell plague skinks without permission from MAF Biosecurity New Zealand.

Department of  
Conservation  
*Te Papa Atawhai*



## Where are plague skinks currently found?

Plague skinks appeared in Auckland during the 1960s, probably introduced accidentally in freight and cargo. Since then, they have steadily expanded their range through the North Island, and are currently found from Northland to Waikato and the Bay of Plenty, with outlying populations at Whanganui, Palmerston North and Foxton Beach. An incursion of plague skinks is being managed on Aotea/Great Barrier Island. **Plague skinks are not present or established in the South Island.**

## When and where will you find them?

Plague skinks are most active during the day when temperatures are above 10°C. They are generally found under vegetation and stacked wood, in gardens, on pathways or tracks, and basking in the sun on the edge of bush. Plague skinks thrive in gardens, garden centres, commercial areas, industrial sites and other urban areas.

Plague skinks often lay their eggs in the soil of potted plants. You may find communal nests of 20–100 small white eggs (8–10 mm long, oval in shape, with tough leathery shells).

## How can you prevent the spread of plague skinks?

The pathway exists for plague skinks to 'hitchhike' to the South Island, other offshore islands and North Island areas that are presently free of the skinks through the movement of mail, personal effects, household items, shipping containers and other freight.

If you are moving anything from areas that are known to have plague skinks, **please thoroughly check all items** for the skinks or their eggs. Potting mix and potted plants pose a particular threat—**please check all plants, their soil and containers** for the small, white, oval eggs, especially if the plant material is destined for sensitive areas, such as island restoration projects.



## What can you do?

As plague skinks are not presently known from the South Island or most of New Zealand's offshore islands, it is important that you **immediately report any sightings** in these areas to **MAF Biosecurity New Zealand (on 0800 80 99 66)** or the **Department of Conservation hotline (0800 362 468)**.



Plague skink adult. Photo: Tony Whitaker.



Plague skink head. Photo: Tony Whitaker.

## For more information

See the Department of Conservation website ([www.doc.govt.nz/plagueskinks](http://www.doc.govt.nz/plagueskinks)) or the MAF Biosecurity New Zealand website ([www.biosecurity.govt.nz/pests/rainbow-skink](http://www.biosecurity.govt.nz/pests/rainbow-skink)).

**New Zealand Government**