

SPECIES PROFILE

The Ground Lizards of Isla Mona: *Ameiva alboguttata*

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In addition to the Mona Island Iguana, the island supports one endemic frog (*Eleutherodactylus monensis*), four other lizards, and three snakes. Of the lizards, one is a widely distributed exotic species (*Hemidactylus mabouia*), a second also is widely distributed in the West Indies, but probably native to the region (*Mabuia sloanii* complex), and the other two are endemic to the island (*Sphaerodactylus monensis*, *Ameiva alboguttata*). Of the snakes, one is an endemic species (*Typhlops monensis*) and the other two are endemic subspecies (*Epicrates monensis monensis*, *Alsophis portoricensis variegatus*), although, as for the iguana, some authorities consider the Isla Mona populations to be full species (see also article on facing page).

Until recently, *Ameiva alboguttata* was considered to be a subspecies of *A. exsul*, a species that is widely distributed on the Puerto Rico Bank. However, the two species differ consistently in color and pattern and are precluded from any gene exchange by the insular distribution of the Isla Mona form.

As for many of its relatives throughout the Neotropics, surface activity of *A. alboguttata* often is restricted to the period from mid-morning to early afternoon, although some individuals may reappear during the late afternoon. This activity period allows these lizards to avoid cooler mornings and evenings and to avoid the very hot mid-afternoons when temperatures frequently exceed even the tolerance of these heat-loving animals. At first glance, Mona Ground Lizards appear to move constantly, but closer observations will reveal short pauses in direct sunlight or

shade. These allow the relatively precise thermoregulation designed to maintain optimal temperatures approaching 40 °C.

Also like other species of *Ameiva*, *A. alboguttata* is an active forager. Rather than sitting on an elevated perch looking for movement by potential prey (a "sit-and-wait" strategy), Ground Lizards actively search for food, often rooting vigorously in leaves and other debris. Prey consists largely of small arthropods, and otherwise inactive life stages (pupae and larvae) are sometimes excavated during the search. Although not documented on Isla Mona, larger individuals of other species of *Ameiva* are known to consume vertebrates, including smaller lizards, and may occasionally eat carrion. Ground Lizards also may consume plant material, especially seasonally abundant fruits or flowers.

As the common name implies, Ground Lizards are essentially terrestrial, foraging on the surface and retreating into self-excavated burrows. However, one documented observation described a subadult *A. alboguttata* following a trail of ants high on the trunk of a large tree. Although obviously capable of climbing, such arboreal activity has been observed only very rarely.

References

- Powell, R. and E.J. Censky. 2002. *Ameiva alboguttata*. Arboreal activity. *Herpetological Review* 33:50.
- Rivero, J.A. 1998. *Los Anfibios y Reptiles de Puerto Rico. The Amphibians and Reptiles of Puerto Rico*. 2nd rev. ed. Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, San Juan.



Adult and juvenile (lower right) *Ameiva alboguttata* foraging in leaf litter on Isla Mona. Photographs by Robert Powell.