

Sand skinks

We are fortunate in Highlands County because we live in such a unique and rare environment. Many extraordinary plants and animals can only be found on the Lake Wales Ridge, which runs down the center of our beautiful county. Once, long ago, the ridge was the only landmass in Florida that was above the surface of the ocean. Thus, its sandy soils and elevation make it the only suitable habitat for critters such as the Florida sand skink.

The Florida sand skink is of the genus *Neoseps reynoldsi*. It is a very unique creature which has adapted to an underground existence. A smooth-scaled, shiny lizard that generally stays out of sight, the Florida sand skink literally swims through the loose sand. They leave wavy trails behind them in the sand. The skink measures about 4 to 5 inches in length and is gray or tan in coloration. The tail makes up half of the creature's total length. It has a wedge-shaped head which helps it slice through the sand and grooves in its body in which the forelegs can be folded. Its small eyes have transparent covers in the lower lids which allow it to see even when it closes its eyes to protect it from the gritty sand. It has no external ear opening so there is no possibility of it getting sand in its ears. Its forelegs are tiny and have only one toe; the hind legs are small and have 2 toes. This unique and amazing creature literally swims under the surface of the earth.

The sand skink usually eats surface-dwelling invertebrates including beetle larva, termites, spiders and larval antlions. The skinks are most active in the spring which is when they mate. Once the skink has reached 1 to 2 years in age, it can reproduce and will remain active for 2 to 3 years. The female usually lays 2 eggs which will hatch in June or July.

The Florida sand skink is on the federal endangered species list. (US Fish and Wildlife Service) The only place they live is in central Florida. The habitat it requires is covered with Sand pine – Florida rosemary scrub or a Longleaf pine-American turkey oak association, including the Florida scrub habitat. The skink requires the moisture which is located beneath the surface litter. It usually remains underground and burrows about 2 to 4 inches beneath the soil to find its food.

For sand-dwelling organisms such as the Florida sand skink, the Florida scrub is home. Even though we humans may view the scrub as a vast sea of sand and some may even feel that it is a "wasteland," the skink does not share these views. For them, scrub is their world. They have special opportunities and have different adaptations than other animals that live in different types of soils. As with the Florida sand skink, many animals that are adapted to these sandy oceans can live no where else on earth.

Unfortunately, these amazing creatures are vulnerable to extinction as more of their habitat is lost. Much of the Lake Wales Ridge has already been cleared for development or citrus production. As more and more areas are utilized by humans and cleared of vegetation, the skinks are rapidly disappearing.

According to the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, efforts to protect the sand skink and other xeric upland species are underway and include the acquisition, protection, and management of a number of xeric upland sites. Recovery of the sand skink will require

management of conservation lands, restoration of habitat and possible reintroduction of individuals into successfully-rehabilitated habitat.

Some of the ways we can all help this amazing lizard are:

- Reduce the amount of pesticides near scrub areas which may be home to sand skinks.
- Control exotic species that may compete with the native skink.
- Control off-road access into scrub habitat, which may degrade and destroy rare plants which may be vital in the food chain for the skink.
- Do not allow scrub habitats to become overgrown. In most situations, unmanaged scrub tends to become dense and tall, conditions which are not favorable to many scrub-dependent species. Management of overgrown scrub must include thinning, burning, mowing, or other techniques to reduce vegetative density.

Perhaps most importantly, efforts must be made to continue to acquire scrub lands. These parcels are imperative to these species and without the scrub plant communities, the Florida sand skink will cease to exist. The public must be educated on the importance of the plants and animals that call the scrub habitat home, not only for the sake of the particular species, but the place they hold in the food chain. We can all do our part by getting involved with the protection of this precious plant community.