



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

The many faces of the alligator lizard

That alligator lizard in the picture was serious about living up to its name. It and my son Caleb's finger met while we were exploring the Lava Beds National Monument back in the 1980s.

They had come upon each other while my wife, Sue, and the rest of our kids were pursuing and tagging monarch butterflies on the northern part of the monument. It did eventually spit out Caleb's finger, but little did we know how aggressive that beautiful, ambitious lizard could be.

The alligator lizard clan was first classified in the 1830s by Arend Friedrich August Wiegmann, a German zoologist and herpetologist (a person who studies lizards, snakes, and amphibians). In 1835, he founded, together with other scholars, the zoological periodical known as *Wiegmann's Archive*.

Wiegmann specialized in classifying Mexican fish and herps, and in 1834 he published *Herpetologia Mexicana*, a monograph on the reptiles of Mexico. One of his discoveries from his Mexican travels, Weigman's Alligator Lizard, *Gerrhonotus liocephalus* is still on the books the way he described it.

But all the other alligator lizards found in the western U.S. have been renamed and reclassified for their coloring, habitat, geographic locations, and other traits.

According to Al St. John's Lone Pine field guide, *Reptiles of The Northwest*, he's listed the Oregon alligator lizard, the California alligator lizard and a bunch

of others running around in California as separate species, such as the San Francisco, Sierra, Northwestern, Shasta, and five or six species of alligator lizards in Canada.

While naming them is difficult, the diet of the alligator lizard is simple: whatever will fit into its mouth. That can be other, smaller lizards and snakes which are devoured as soon as they're spotted. A nice fat and juicy scarab beetle will vanish down the lizard's gullet in the blink of an eye.

If the alligator lizard's an occupant of your kitchen garden you will never need to apply any pesticides; cabbage looper caterpillars will be gobbled up; along with flea beetles; corn borer caterpillars; squash bugs; cutworm larvae; and other plant pests.

Alligator lizards are almost fearless when it comes to prey; mice and even a juvenile gopher will be grabbed and swallowed. But then there's that old



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

An alligator lizard trying to live up to it's name.

adage, "He who lives by the sword..." Alligator lizards are often caught and eaten by the American kestrel, who also feeds it/them to the babies. Gopher snakes, whip snakes and the like will not hesitate to take an alligator lizard for a snack.

The most surprising location I found alligator lizards was on the coast, around OMSI's Camp Arago near

North Bend, where I suppose some hair-splitter has named them the Coastal or Cape Arago alligator lizard. They love hunting for prey behind the dunes where OMSI students watched them devouring beetles and other inhabitants of the sandy soils. We watched one who was agile enough to hang onto

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