

CHAPTER IX

THE WALL LIZARD, *LACERTA MURALIS*

DISTRIBUTION—HABITS—DESCRIPTION—CHARACTERS
COMMON TO THE FAMILY.

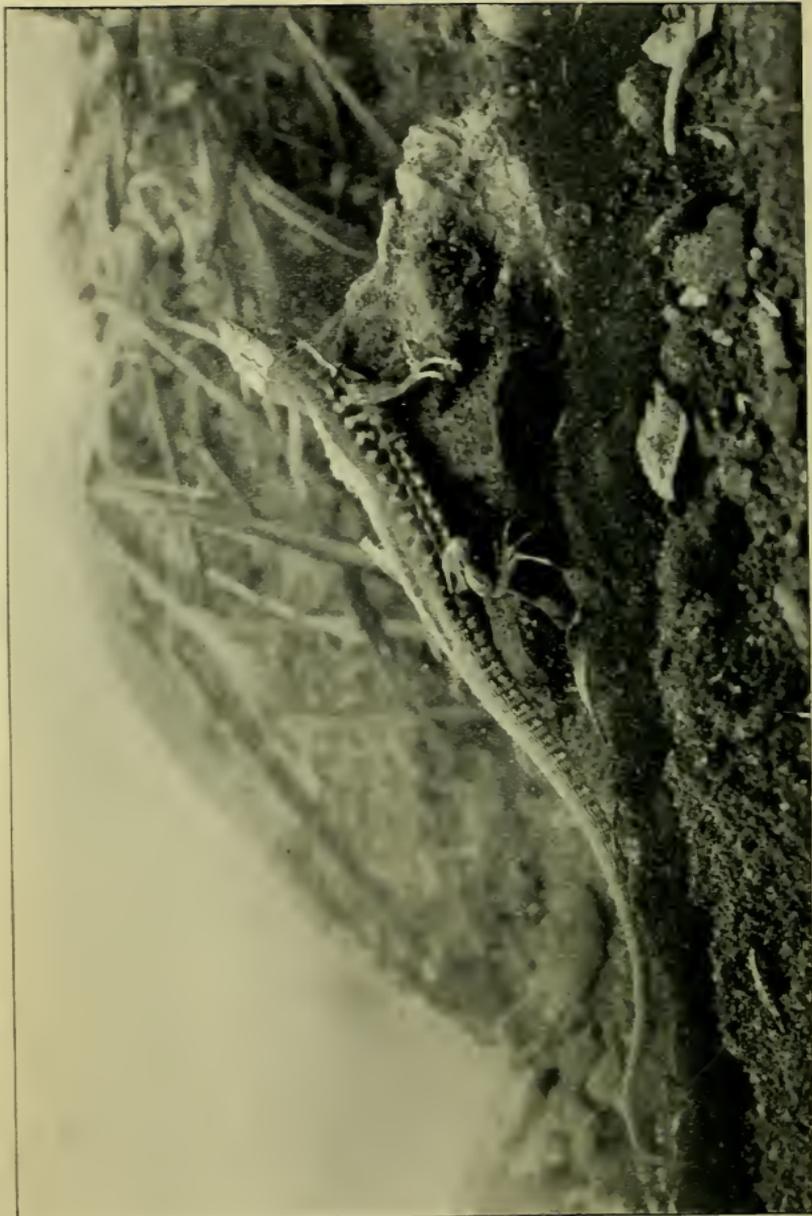
WE have already explained why it is that the green lizard has found a place in a work on British species, and it is for the same reasons that the wall lizard, *Lacerta muralis*, must be here included. The one cannot be regarded as a British species unless the other be also so regarded, since it is simply a question of the inclusion or omission of the Channel Islands in the area denominated British. Since we include these islands in our faunal divisions, both these species, on that ground alone, become British.

Whilst it is necessary, for the sake of consistency and uniformity, to do this, the fact remains that the average field naturalist in this country has but a nominal acquaintance with the wall lizard; and since it will not come under his observation in field work, unless he pays a visit to its habitat in the Channel Islands or elsewhere, it is not necessary to treat it



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WALL LIZARD (MALE).
LACERTA MURALIS.

in the same detail as in the case of the other species.

Distribution.—The wall lizard is a very common species in the countries of South Europe, as well as across the Mediterranean in Northern Africa. It is also common in Asia Minor. To the north its distribution extends as far as the more southern portion of Germany, and into Belgium. Dr. Gadow states that in the Iberian Peninsula it is found at an altitude of 5000 or 6000 feet above the level of the sea. Speaking generally, the distribution of this species may be said to be chiefly in those countries bordering upon the Mediterranean.

Description and Habits.—The average length of the wall lizard is from 6 to 8 inches, so that it is one of the smaller species. “This graceful little creature is easily recognised by the series of granules between the supra-ocular and supra-ciliary scales, and usually by having only six rows of ventral scales. The great variety in colouration has given rise to the establishment of many races, varieties, and subspecies. In the typical forms the upper parts are brown or greyish, with blackish spots or streaks, sometimes with a bronzy-greenish sheen. The under parts are white, yellow, pink, or red, either uniform or, especially in the males, with large black spots. The lateral rows of ventral shields are frequently blue. The colour-varieties are almost endless. One of the most noteworthy is that described as var. *cærulea* by Eimer;

this, confined to the Faraglione Rocks, near Capri, is blackish above, like the rock, and sapphire-blue below.¹ Similarly coloured specimens, var. *lilfordi*, occur on some of the rocky islets of the Balearic Isles.

“The wall lizard deserves its name, since in the Mediterranean countries there is scarcely a wall on which these active lizards do not bask or run up and down, often head downwards, in search of insects. They are oviparous. The hibernation is short and not very deep, since these lizards can sometimes be seen basking on sunny winter days before their regular appearance in the early spring.”²

As its specific name implies, the wall lizard belongs to the same family—the Lacertidæ—as the green lizard, the common viviparous lizard, and the sand lizard. The slow-worm is the only British species which is not of this family. This family of Lacertidæ, or the True Lizards, as they are called, comprises “nearly twenty genera, with about one hundred species, and is typical of the Old World, being found in Europe, Asia, Africa, but not in Madagascar, nor in the Australian region. They are most abundant in Africa. Their northern limit coincides fairly closely with the limit of the permanently frozen underground. All the Lacertidæ live upon animal food, chiefly insects, and, after them, worms and snails; but the larger lizards take what they can master, fre-

¹ Boulenger, *British Museum Catalogue*.

² Gadow, *Amphibia and Reptiles*, pp. 557, 558.



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quently other lizards, and even younger members of their own kind. Many of them love sugar, which they lick, and all require water. They are all terrestrial, preferring, according to their kind, such localities as yield them their particular food. Sunshine and warmth make a marvellous change in the same individual, which on dull, rainy, or cold days lies in its hole, or shows only sluggish movements. Their sense of locality is great, or rather each individual inhabits one place of which it knows every nook and corner, cranny, tree, and bush. It has its favourite hole to sleep in, a stone, the branch of a tree, or a wall to bask upon, and when disturbed or chased it makes with unerring swiftness for a safe spot to retire into. The same lizard, when once driven away from its own locality, seems to lose all its presence of mind, flounders about, and is comparatively easily caught. Most lizards are extremely curious, although shy, and this state of their mind can be made use of by those who want to catch them without injury, and, above all, without getting the animal minus the brittle tail. This safe way of catching lizards consists in taking a thin rod with a running noose of thread at the end, in drawing the latter over the lizard's head, and then raising it. The little creature does not mind the rod in the least; on the contrary, it watches it carefully, and often makes for the thread. The boys in Southern Italy have improved upon and simplified this mode of catching lizards by bending the end of a wisp of grass

into a noose, and covering the latter over with a thin film of saliva. The shiny film, like a soap-bubble, is sure to excite the curiosity of the creature. The late Professor Eimer refers to this practice as carried out by the children of two thousand years ago, and he sagaciously explains that the beautiful statue of the so-called Apollo Sauroctonos represents a boy who is in the act of noosing the little lizard on the tree.”¹

Field naturalists who wish to pursue their study of lizards beyond the limited lizard fauna of Great Britain, cannot do better than read Dr. Gadow's book, from which we have quoted the above passages.

The general appearance and attitudes of *L. muralis* may be best appreciated from the illustrations, which are from photographs of living specimens.

¹ Gadow, *Amphibia and Reptiles*, pp. 551-553.



WALL LIZARD.
(Showing fight.)

