

dunes. Along the southern border of the sands, specimens with body lengths of 5.6–8.1 cm live among *Caragana* bushes, clumps of Chee Grass, under pieces of debris and discarded objects. Along the northern boundary of the sands, they are found among poplars and *Caragana*. They dig their own burrows, 30–40 cm long, under shrubs, more often at their base. This species is diurnal; in summer, it ceases its activity during the hottest hours, especially in southern regions. Based on observations made in Tuva, this species retreats to its overwintering sites in the first decade of October. The Gobi Racerunner, similarly to the Multi-ocellated Racerunner, is an ovoviparous lizard. From the second half of July to mid-August, females give birth to 1–3 young with body lengths of 2.5–3.1 cm and tail lengths of 2.6–3.4 cm. In the sands of Zuger-Els, at the beginning of July, 4–5 embryos were found inside females at different stages of development, and one female gave birth to five babies in a terrarium. Females reach sexual maturity in the second year of life at a minimum body length of about 6.5 cm. The diet of this species includes dipterans, beetles, hymenopterans, butterflies and varies depending on location. Cases of cannibalism have been recorded. At times when niterbush berries ripen, these racerunners "graze" on the bushes, and avidly eat berries as well as young leaves.

Conservation status: The Gobi Racerunner is included in the Red Data Books of Russia and Tuva.

Rapid Steppe Runner

Eremias velox (PALLAS, 1771)

Figs. 333–336, Map 68

This is the nimblest racerunner. Not only does it run quickly on flat surfaces but it also moves with great ease on steep cliffs, and climbs into bushes to cool itself or eat seeds and fruit.

External appearance: The Rapid Steppe Runner may reach a body length of 7.8 cm, a tail length of 14.4 cm and a body weight of 2.8–15 g. The suborbital scale touches the edge of the mouth; the



Map 68: *Eremias velox*.

supraoculars are completely separated by a series of granules from the frontal and frontoparietal scales.

Pattern and colour depend on age and gender, and vary widely within the species' range. Juveniles have a distinctive pattern of dark, longitudinal stripes on their back, with the middle band splitting on the neck. On the sides of the body, there are the same stripes with bright, dark-edged ocelli with a located on these stripes. In adults, the upper side of the body is grey, sandy or olive coloured, and the longitudinal stripes are less bright, or, also, they break into separate spots of irregular shape. Ocelli that are pale and dark-edged, on the sides of the body of adults, become blue or greenish; the undersurface of the thighs, front legs, and collar are yellowish in spring, and white in summer and autumn. Young and immature specimens differ from the adults also by the exceptionally bright colour, ranging from blood red to dark orange, on the undersurface of their tail and thighs.

Distinguishing features: This species differs from the Steppe Runner by its lighter build, longer tail, the bright colouration of the undersurface of tail in juveniles and by having colourful ocelli in adult males.

Distribution and subspecies: The Rapid Racerunner is widespread in northern and north-eastern Iran, northern Afghanistan,



Fig. 333: A Rapid Steppe Runner, *Eremias velox*, showing the characteristic livery of juveniles. The striped pattern and the red ventral surface of the tail distinguish young individuals from adults.

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north-western China, in semi-deserts and deserts of Eastern Transcaucasia, Kazakhstan and the states of Central Asia. In Russia, this species is found in the Lower Volga region (Astrakhan and Volgograd regions), in the eastern Ciscaucasia, and in Dagestan.

Of the three recognized subspecies, Russia is inhabited by the Caucasian Rapid Racerunner, *E. v. caucasica* LANTZ, 1928.

Natural history: In the northern and central parts of its range, the Rapid Steppe Runner is a common and abundant species. In the north, it prefers sandy soils with green or grassy-shrub vegetation whereas in the southern regions, it prefers foothills and valleys of rivers with sparse vegetation, especially pebble beds with tamarix bushes, areas of stony steppes with rare bushes of wormwood and grasses. Rapid Steppe Runners dig up to 20–25 cm long and up to 10 cm deep burrows in soft soil; they also use the burrows of rodents and tortoises. Each lizard has its own, relatively small territory which it leaves rarely and only for short periods. In case of danger, it tries to return immediately to its shelter or hide in bushes. The activity is diurnal, with a single-peak in spring and autumn, and a double peak in hot weather. On the hottest days, this lizard can remain cool by climbing onto bushes, where the air temperature is well below that of the soil surface. During cloudy and windy summer days, the Rapid Steppe Runner does not leave its shelter, but can look out of it; after rain or during cold weather, it does not come out of its hole for 2–3 days. Their active season, depending on the area, lasts from March–April to October or early November.

During the mating season, which begins at the end of April, fierce fights are observed between the males, and the winner chases the defeated male for a long time after. The male pursues the female and, after having caught her, grabs her with his teeth by the side or thigh, trying to keep her in place. It happens that the male drags the female for a distance of 10–15 m, according to the traces of the male and the female's forelimbs left on the sand. In Dagestan, the majority of females lay two clutches during the summer, usually of two (less often 3–4) eggs. The yearlings, which are 2.5–3.6 cm long, appear in the second half of July. The basis of their diet consists of various insects, mainly beetles and ants, and other invertebrates, and, in rare cases, seeds and fruits of plants. In dry summers, these lizards frequently eat mulberry fruits. During prey hunting, the Rapid Steppe Runner climbs up on the bushes, moves along cliff walls, and jumps.

Conservation status: In most parts of the species' range, no protective measures are required. However, in the Republic of North Ossetia, in Alania, *Eremias velox* is included in the Red Data Book.

Genus *Lacerta* LINNAEUS, 1758

Green lizards

This genus includes the largest lizards of the family reaching body lengths of up to 17.5 cm. The representatives of the genus have a thick head, strong limbs, and a massive build. Colour and pattern vary according to gender and age. Most juveniles and some females have 3–5 pale bands on their backs. In adult lizards, the main colour of the back is usually bright green, often with a pattern of large, elongated dark spots and small, white, black-edged ocelli on the sides of the body, especially in young *Lacerta agilis* LINNAEUS,



Fig. 334: Juvenile Rapid Steppe Runner. Note the large tick attached to the flank.

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Fig. 335: An adult Rapid Steppe Runner from Dagestan.

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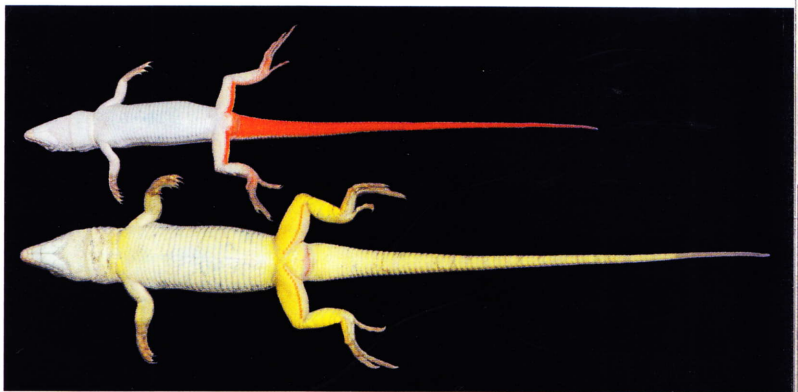


Fig. 336: Ventral colouration of two Rapid Steppe Runners, juvenile above, adult below.

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1758 and *L. schreiberi* BEDRIAGA, 1878. Some green lizards are rather uniformly coloured, with indistinct or barely noticeable pattern. The venter is usually green or yellowish, rarely bluish; the throat is often blue in males and some females, especially during the breeding season, when the flanks turn blue (some *L. media* LANTZ & CYRÉN, 1920 and *L. pamphilica* SCHMIDTLER, 1975). Many black spots can be present, especially in *L. agilis* and *L. schreiberi*. The tail of hatchlings is not bright, except in *L. schreiberi*, in which the tail may be orange.

The dorsal scales are always strongly keeled. The nasal scales are not swollen; the nostril is located between the two nasals. There is an occipital scale, a notched collar, and a throat fold in all species.