

## Topic Page: [reptile](#)

Definition: **reptile** from *The Penguin Dictionary of Science*

A member of the vertebrate class **Reptilia**, whose members have a scaly skin and typically lay amniotic eggs with a leathery shell. They are an ancient and very diverse group and dominated the earth's fauna until the end of the Triassic ►era. Modern reptiles include snakes, lizards, crocodilians, turtles and terrapins.



Image from: [reptile in The Macmillan Encyclopedia](#)

Summary Article: **reptile**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

name for the dry-skinned, usually scaly, cold-blooded vertebrates (see Chordata) of the order Reptilia. Reptiles are found in a variety of habitats throughout the warm and temperate regions (except on some islands), with the greatest variety in the tropics. Reptiles differ from other terrestrial vertebrates (birds and mammals) in that they are cold-blooded, that is, they lack an effective system for regulating their body temperature, which tends to approach that of the environment. For this reason reptiles are not found in the coldest regions of the world, and they hibernate in cool winter areas.

They range in size from 2-in.-long (5-cm) lizards to 30-ft-long (9-m) snakes. They typically have low-slung bodies with long tails, supported by four short legs that project outward from the sides of the body; however, all snakes are limbless. Although reptiles are fundamentally a terrestrial group, some are adapted to living in water. All breathe air by means of lungs and have thick, waterproof skins designed for retaining body moisture. Unlike amphibians, they do not possess gills or breathe water at any stage of their development, and nearly all lay their eggs or bear their young on land.

The reptilian egg has a porous shell and a system of membranes designed to protect the embryo from desiccation. It also has a large quantity of yolk for nourishment. This type of egg is typical of terrestrial vertebrates, and is very different from the simple, unprotected eggs of fishes and amphibians, which are laid in the water. Fertilization is internal in reptiles, and males have copulatory organs. Females of most species lay eggs, but in some the egg is incubated and hatched internally. In a very few there is true live birth, with the young nourished by a primitive placenta instead of an egg yolk.

### **Types of Reptiles**

Living reptiles are classified in four orders. The turtles, order Chelonia, have a protective bony shell, usually covered with horny plates. They are mostly aquatic in habits although some (see tortoise) are adapted to land. They are the oldest living reptiles, having existed nearly unchanged since the Triassic period. Members of the order Crocodylia, which includes alligators, caimans, crocodiles, and gavials, are large, carnivorous reptiles of tropical and subtropical swamps and rivers. They constitute the only remaining order of the great reptilian subclass Archosauria, or ruling reptiles, which includes the extinct dinosaurs. The order Squamata includes the lizards (suborder Sauria) and snakes (suborder Serpentes). Nearly all members of this large and successful modern order are terrestrial. The order Rhynchocephalia has a single living member, the tuatara, a lizardlike reptile of New Zealand.

### **Evolution**

Reptiles first evolved from amphibians about 250 million years ago in the Carboniferous period and

were dominant in the world's fauna during the Mesozoic era, sometimes called the Age of Reptiles. The dinosaurs, the marine Ichthyosaurus and Plesiosaurus, and the flying pterosaurs reached the peak of their development and distribution in the later part of this era (late Cretaceous period). Mammallike reptiles appeared very early in reptilian history and by the Triassic period had given rise to mammals. Bird ancestors arose from precursors of the dinosaurs; the first known birds lived in the Jurassic. The only reptiles that survived into the Cenozoic era belonged to the presently living orders. The approximately 6,000 living reptile species represent a very small fraction of this once vast class.

## **Bibliography**

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