

# Tuatara



COMMON NAME:	<b>TUATARA</b>
LATIN NAME:	<i>Sphenodon punctatus</i>
LATIN MEANING:	Sphenodon – Gr. <i>sphen-enos</i> , 'wedge'; <i>odus, odontos</i> , 'tooth'. <i>Punctatus</i> L. 'spotted'
MAORI NAME:	Tuatara means 'peaks on the back'
CLASS:	Reptilia
ORDER:	Rhynchocephalian
FAMILY:	Sphenodontidae
GENUS:	<i>Sphenodon</i>
SPECIES/SUB SPECIES:	<i>Punctatus</i>

## DESCRIPTION:

Similar in appearance to lizards, the tuatara is the only surviving member of a reptile family known as Sphenodon, meaning 'wedge tooth'. Sphenodons became extinct some 60 million years ago, leaving the tuatara as the last remaining representative or 'living fossil'. Tuatara may live up to 100 years; males weigh around 1 kg and are some 50 cm in length. Females are shorter and a good deal lighter. Skin colouration can vary between animals from an olive green to dark pink or slate grey. Young Tuatara possess a third eye or 'pineal eye', which has a lens, retina and nervous connections to the brain, but has no visual function. Males have no sexual organ. They can swim well and are most active between 7–22 degrees Celsius.

## HABITAT / DISTRIBUTION:

Once found right throughout New Zealand, they are now restricted to predator-free offshore islands.

## BREEDING:

Sexually mature at around 15–18 years, females mate only every second year. They excavate a short burrow in the ground to lay their eggs. A clutch can consist of up to 15 eggs. They are covered with soil and then left to incubate naturally in the soil's warmth. Incubation can vary from 11–15 months, but once hatching occurs the young are totally independent of their parents – in fact they need to avoid their parents' cannibalistic habits!

## SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR:

Tuatara are nocturnal, but will come out during the day to bask in the sun. Foraging for food takes place at night. Tuatara are one of the longest living and slowest growing reptiles in existence. In cooler parts of the country, Tuatara will hibernate, as they do here at the Otorohanga Kiwi House.

## DIET:

Mainly insectivorous, but will also take smaller reptiles like skinks and geckos and the chicks of petrels with whom they share their burrows. Adults will also predate their own young.

## PRINCIPAL THREATS:

- Introduced predators: Maori introduced the Polynesian rat (kiore) and dog (kuri). Europeans introduced two species of rat, cats, dogs, ferrets, stoats, possums.
- Habitat changes and deforestation has contributed to their decline on the mainland.

CONSERVATION STATUS: Protected since 1895.



Best place in NZ  
to see a kiwi

**OTOROHANGA KIWI HOUSE & NATIVE BIRD PARK**

PO Box 222, Otorohanga 3940, New Zealand

Telephone: +64 (7) 873 7391

[www.kiwihouse.org.nz](http://www.kiwihouse.org.nz)