

Tuatara

Tuataras (*Shenodon punctatus*) are only found in New Zealand. The word tuatara is a native Maori word that means “peaks on back”. Tuataras are not true lizards because they lack external ears, live in cooler temperatures, are nocturnal and have a “third eye”. The third eye is located on top of the head, has a retina, a lens and nerve endings, but is actually covered with scales and pigment. It is not used to see, but is sensitive to light and may help the tuatara judge the time of day or season. Tuataras are slow growers. They do not stop growing until they are approximately 30 years old, and can live 80 years. They are 20 to 31 inches long and weigh up to three pounds. They eat insects, beetles, lizards, birds and eggs.

Tuataras are considered living fossils because their closest living relatives are extinct reptiles that were around during the time of the dinosaurs.

Tuataras are currently an endangered species. When humans from Polynesia first arrived in New Zealand they brought rats and dogs which eat the tuatara’s eggs and young. The New Zealand government began a protection program in 1885. In 1988, the New Zealand Department of Conservation launched a recovery program. Hatchlings are raised by biologists until they are large enough to be released and survive in the wild.

