

inate with a vermiculate or reticulate pattern and rows of spots and ocelli. The young of some species have a striped pattern and a vividly coloured tail undersurface. Males boast bright ocelli on their flanks.

The frontal bone in the skull of *Eremias* is unpaired, unlike in representatives of the genus *Lacerta*, and the row of teeth on the intermaxillary bone is separated from the supramaxillary teeth by a small gap.

Racerunners feed mainly on insects and other invertebrates, but some species may occasionally consume ripe berries, too.

Most species are oviparous but some are ovoviviparous, such as the members of *Eremias multiocellata* GÜNTHER, 1872 complex and the Gobi Desert Runner (*Eremias przewalskii* [STRAUCH, 1876]).

Racerunners are common lizards from south-eastern Europe and western Asia to Korea and north-eastern China in the east. The genus currently comprises 40 species. In the territory of the former USSR, there are about 20 species, of which five are found in Russia. The genus includes five subgenera; representatives of three occur in Russia.

Mongolian Desert Runner

Eremias argus PETERS, 1869

Figs. 318–321, Map 64

As reflected by its Russian and English common names, most of the species' range lies in Mongolia.

External appearance: A small species of *Eremias* with relatively short tail and limbs: the maximum body length is 6.6 cm; tail



Fig. 318: Barbour's Desert Runner, *Eremias argus barbouri*. This specimen is from Mongolia.
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length 8.7 cm. Males and females are of approximately the same size. The head is relatively high, with a bluntly rounded snout.

Mongolian Desert Runners usually have two frontonasals, and 1–2 additional scales between the prefrontals. Colouration and pattern vary within the range but are not related to age and/or sex. On the brownish or olive-grey background of the back, the pattern is composed of up to 10 (usually 6–8) longitudinal rows of round or oval, pale ocelli, or dashes trimmed with black. Dark spots often merge into transverse crossbands, with a gap in the middle of the back. The upper surfaces of limbs are also adorned with ocelli. The



Fig. 319: Another Barbour's Desert Runner from Mongolia.

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Fig. 320: Portrait of a Mongolian Desert Runner.

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Fig. 321: Barbour's Desert Runner from the Agin (Buryat) Autonomous Region.

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ventral surface is white or yellowish. In males, especially old ones, the throat and collar, the outer tip of ventral scales, and often also the hips, are flesh-pink.

Distinguishing features: *Eremias argus* differs from all other species of the genus by having two, instead of one, frontonasal scales.

Distribution and subspecies: This is a common lizard in Mongolia, China, and Korea.

In Russia, this species is found in Southern Buryatia, to the north approximately up to the city of Ulan-Ude, and in the extreme south-west of Chita Region. Of the two subspecies recognized, Russia is inhabited by Barbour's Desert Runner, *E. a. barbouri* SCHMIDT, 1925.

Natural history: In the Transbaikial region, this species is found on stony slopes with scattered bushes or other vegetation, river terraces, and pine forest edges. Mongolian Desert Runners also inhabit railway embankments and settle not only in dry areas but near water as well. In Mongolia, the species occurs in various steppe, forest-steppe, and semi-desert landscapes between 600–2,050 m elevation, where it is often encountered amidst peashrubs (*Caragana*) or rodent (gerbils, Brandt's vole) colonies, seeking refuge in their burrows. In China, it appears to prefer similar dry habitats, and in Korea, apart from the places typical for this species, it also

settles in rice fields. The Mongolian Desert Runner never coexists with other species of *Eremias* and is scarce almost everywhere. It does not construct its own burrows but retreats into rock crevices or the lairs of small mammals in case of danger.

Its activity is diurnal, with a single peak during the day. In the Transbaikial region, the active season lasts from the end of April to the end of August. In the north of the species' range, mating occurs between the end of April and the end of May. This is an oviparous species, but the exact time of egg deposition and the duration of incubation are unknown. Clutches usually contain 2–4 (sometimes as many as six) eggs. The young emerge at the end of July or beginning of August, and have body lengths of 1.7–1.9 cm upon hatching. Mongolian Desert Runners begin to breed in the second year of their life, after reaching body lengths of 5.1–5.3 cm. The diet consists of a variety of insects, mainly beetles, orthopterans, ants, cicadas, caterpillars, caddisflies, as well as spiders. A case of a Mongolian Desert Runner eating a tree frog metamorph has been recorded in the north of Mongolia. In turn, these lizards are preyed upon by raptors and snakes, such as Steppe Ribbon Racers and, possibly, Asian copperheads.

Conservation status: Barbour's Desert Runner is included in the Red Data Books of Russia, Buryatia, and the Agin (Buryat) Autonomous Region.

Map 64: *Eremias argus*.

Steppe Runner

Eremias arguta (PALLAS, 1773)

Figs. 322–325, Map 65

The Steppe Runner stands out from other species of *Eremias* by its vast range and unusually high level of variability in size, colour and pattern, associated with the habitat characteristics.

External appearance: The habitus is massive or more slender. Body length may reach 9.7 cm, tail length 12.2 cm. Adult body weight varies between 7.1 and 29.8 g. The largest individuals are found in the east of the species' range. In Ciscaucasia, the maximum body