

six-lined racerunner



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In early June of this year, a good friend of mine and I went kayak fishing on a lake a few miles south of Sterling, IL. It was a typical outing, although temperatures that day were predicted in the 90's, so we were glad to have hit the water early. As the morning passed, we had little luck and decided to rethink our tactics on shore. While rigging our lines, I noticed a small animal scurrying into some brush near the water's edge. My friend questioned what it was that caught my attention, and I bewilderingly responded that I thought it had been a lizard. He was as surprised by my response as I was, so we left our tackle to see if we could actually verify my testimony. In fact, it didn't take long before my friend called me to his location, proclaiming that he had spotted a lizard. Quietly, I crept over to join him with his outstretched finger pointing to an opening between some shrubs. There, in between the bushes near the water of this lake near Sterling, was a lizard, sitting perfectly still, like a statue. It was surprisingly colorful with a gleaming lime-green head that faded to brown near its haunches, yellow stripes running the length of its back, and light underside with a vibrant blue under the throat, extending onto its jaw. For someone who spends a lot of time outdoors, I'll admit that I was shocked by what I saw. I'll also admit I immediately knew what kind of lizard it was from thumbing through various field guides over the years, and only needed an LTE signal on my phone for verification. The lizard that my friend and I saw that June day, less than an hour's drive from Byron, was indeed a six-lined racerunner.

So, if you're wondering if I counted the lines, rest assured that I did not. There were six lines on its back because no other lizards range this far North in the Central United States, except for the slender glass lizard, which is legless. Had I been in Southern Illinois, I would have needed to count the lines, just to be sure that it wasn't a common five-lined skink. A skink might have let me count them, whereas a racerunner apparently does its best roadrunner impression the moment you more than glance in its direction. We came across several racerunners that day, and we would have had more luck squeezing water out

of a rock than catching one barehanded. They ran across open ground extremely fast, hovering like a plastic puck shot across an air-hockey table. For short-winded spurts it seemed as though they were moving faster than most people on a dead sprint, giving obvious backing to the name of six-lined racerunner. As it turns out, these little 6-10 inch lizards, can reach speeds up to 18 mph, whereas your neighborhood squirrel tops out at around 12 mph. Seeing, or barely seeing, an animal of that size moving at such speeds is actually pretty incredible, and an experience I won't soon forget.



The six-lined racerunner is considered a species of whiptail lizard, with a tail nearly twice the length of its body. It has adapted a tail which can break off, and later regrow, to help in evading predators. The racerunner is a supremely energetic and alert day-time hunter, feeding primarily on insects, while attempting to avoid predators such as hawks and other birds, snakes, and small mammals. They are found in a wide variety of habitats throughout their range, although in Illinois and Southern Wisconsin the racerunner seems to prefer open woodlands with well-drained sandy or rocky ground. Males tend to have blueish undersides, while females may just be white. They breed in early summer, with each active female laying no more than a half dozen eggs in her nest. The young emerge ready to hunt from birth, but lacking fully developed muscles makes them more vulnerable prey. With a cold-blooded metabolism, the racerunner must regulate its body temperature, seeking warm places to bask and shaded areas to cool. In order to survive the winter, the racerunner usually tunnels below the frost line, into the loose soil of a South-facing slope. Although there is habitat suitable for the six-lined racerunner at the Forest Preserve, no specimens have been recorded to date.