

THE AMERICAN BIOLOGY TEACHER



About Our Cover

A brown basilisk (*Basiliscus vittatus*) perches on a blade of swamp grass not far from downtown Miami. This lizard is just one of literally hundreds of invasive reptiles that have established stable populations in south Florida. A major hub for the exotic pet trade and animal smuggling, Miami has become a battleground where introduced species from South and Central America compete with native species for resources. Unfortunately, more often than not, the invasive species win that battle.

In their native Latin America, brown basilisks are equally at home in arboreal habitats and on the ground. Primarily insectivorous, these lizards will hunt for invertebrates in trees, on the ground, and even in shallow ponds and streams. Speed is a major advantage for this species, whether hunting or escaping predators, and they retain their speed whether on the ground, climbing trees, or crossing water sources. Similar to their more well-known cousin the green basilisk (*B. basiliscus*), brown basilisks have been observed using their long, partially webbed back feet to run across the surface of water for short distances, which has given them the nickname "the Jesus Christ lizard."

The brown basilisk is a species of least concern within its native range and has become predictably prolific in its introduced range in Florida, where it has found an agreeable climate, abundant food sources, and an absence of major predators. Each year, native species disappear as a result of the presence of these exotics, and while legislation has helped stem the flow of such invasive organisms, in places like south Florida the damage already done to the ecosystem may very well be irreparable.

This photo was taken at Fairchild Museum and Gardens in Miami, Florida, by Ben Holdridge, a zoology student at Cal Poly Pomona and former wildlife biologist for the Frost Museum of Science in Miami. The photo was taken with a Nikon D5300 and Nikkor 105mm 2.8f macro at ISO 100, f/5.6, 1/200sec.

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