

A NEW SPECIES OF *LERISTA* (LACERTILIA: SCINCIDAE) FROM NORTHERN QUEENSLAND, WITH REMARKS ON THE ORIGIN OF THE GENUS

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With 34 described species (Cogger 1975), *Lerista* is the second largest genus of lizards in Australia, and like the largest genus — the scincid genus *Ctenotus* with 53 described species — it is widespread in the arid, semi-arid and seasonally dry parts of the continent. In contrast to the large, surface dwelling species of *Ctenotus*, however, the species of *Lerista* are small, attenuate forms with reduced or non-existent limbs and cryptozoic to fossorial habits.

As a result of the painstaking work of Dr Glen Storr of the Western Australian Museum, the alpha taxonomy of both genera in the western half of the continent is well known. In the eastern half, however, the alpha taxonomy of the two genera is still poorly known and several species await description in both groups. Both taxa are important to our understanding of how lizards have evolved in the vast arid regions of Australia (see for example Pianka's [1972] use of *Ctenotus* in his zoogeographical analysis of Australian desert lizards), and a sound and complete taxonomy of the two groups is therefore greatly to be desired.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a new species of *Lerista* from northern Queensland that is unusual in being legless and to comment on the origin of the genus.

***Lerista ameles* n.sp.**

(Fig. 1)

HOLYTYPE. Queensland Museum J 30004. Collected 19.7 km west of the junction of the Kennedy and Gulf Highways along the Gulf Highway, northeastern Queensland on 22 June 1977 by Allen E. Greer. This specimen was formerly A.M. R 63192.

DIAGNOSIS. *Lerista ameles* and the recently described *apoda* (Storr 1976) are the only species of *Lerista* that are limbless. *L. ameles* differs most noticeably from *apoda* in having the eye well developed but small and protected by a movable lower eyelid instead of vestigial below a fixed head scale; the frontoparietals and interparietal distinct instead of fused into a single scale, and the snout bluntly rounded in lateral view instead of wedge-shaped.

DESCRIPTION. In general appearance *ameles* is a small, limbless skink of nearly uniform dark but slightly shiny coloration.

Rostral wider than long, with an acute posteriorly projecting medial apex; nasals very large, in broad medial contact; nostril placed well forward in nasal; supralabials five, first much the largest, third below centre of eye; frontonasal much wider than long; prefrontals widely separated; loreals two; frontal about as wide as long; supraoculars two, first in contact with frontal; supraciliaries two, first projecting in front of first supraocular and