Anatomy Terms Glossary: Reptiles

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There is a wealth of jargon used throughout the reptile world. This is especially true when discussing reptile anatomy. Learning this vocabulary allows you to better understand articles and what veterinarians, reptile hobbyists and other reptile owners are saying. The following list of terms, while in no way comprehensive, contains some of the terms used to discuss reptile anatomy.

Anterior
Having to do with the head or the front end.

Autotomy
A defensive mechanism by which some lizards voluntarily shed their tails when they feel threatened to escape a predator.

Bridge
The area connecting the carapace and plastron on chelonians (turtles and tortoises).

Carapace
The hard, bony shell covering the dorsal portion of chelonians (turtles and tortoises).

Caudal
Having to do with the tail end; referring to the tail.

CL
"Carapace length," a common measurement for chelonians (turtles and tortoises).

Cloaca
A tube-like structure that is used to pass waste and reproductive discharges (fluids or eggs).

Cold blooded
An animal that cannot regulate its own body temperature and metabolic function and must instead rely on external environmental conditions. See also Ectothermic.

Crest
A decorative ridge of spikes or skin that are found on the necks, backs, and/or tails of some reptiles.

Dewlap
A flap or fold of skin found on the throat of some lizards, such as iguanas. It generally stretches from the chin to the chest, and it may be used during displays of territoriality or aggression.

Dorsal
Having to do with the top or back of an animal; opposite of ventral.

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Dysecdysis
A condition when a shed is abnormal or incomplete.

Ecdysis
The natural process of shedding skin to allow for growth.

Ectothermic
An animal that cannot regulate its own body temperature and metabolic function and must instead rely on external environmental conditions. See also Cold blooded.

Endothermic
An animal that can regulate its own body temperature and metabolic function; also known as warm blooded.

Fracture plane
Regularly spaced sections between or in the middle of vertebrae in a reptile's tail where breakage occurs during autotomy.

Jacobson's organ
An organ located in the roof of the mouth that allows reptiles that "smell" with their tongue to detect odor.

Keel
A ridge down the center of a scale.

Lateral
Having to do with the side.

Parotoid glands
Paired glands that appear as large bumps on a reptile. In some herps, they secrete toxic substances used for self-defense.

Parietal eye
An organ found on some lizards on the top of their heads. It senses light and is active in prompting hormone production and assisting with thermoregulation. Also known as a pineal eye or third eye, though it does not actually form images.

Plastron
The ventral (bottom) part of a chelonian's shell that protects its abdomen; opposite the carapace.

Posterior
Having to do with the rear or hind end.

Scute
Bony or chitinous external plate or scale, found on a chelonian or the ventral side of a snake. Also known as scutum.

Setae
The tiny, hair-like projections located on the toe pads of some lizard species. Setae allow these lizards to walk and climb on vertical surfaces, such as glass, and even ceilings. Singular: seta.

Snout-tail length (STL)
Standard measurement of a reptile from the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail.

Snout-vent length (SVL)
Standard measurement of a reptile from the tip of its nose to its vent, or anus.

Thermoregulation
The process by which reptiles self-regulate their body temperature by moving between warm and cool areas of their habitat.

Vent
The outside opening of the cloaca that connects it to the anus.

Ventral

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Having to do with the bottom or stomach part of an animal; opposite of dorsal.

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