

St. Croix Ground Lizard
(Ameiva polops)

Status Review:
Summary and Evaluation



Adult St. Croix ground lizard (photo by N. Angeli - DPNR).

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Southeast Region
Caribbean Ecological Services Field Office
Mayagüez, Puerto Rico

June 2025

STATUS REVIEW

St. Croix ground lizard (*Pholidoscelis polops*, listed as *Ameiva polops*)

GENERAL INFORMATION

Current Classification: Endangered

Lead Field Office: Caribbean Ecological Services Field Office, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, caribbean_es@fws.gov

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Reviewers:

Lead Regional Office: Atlanta Regional Office, Carrie Straight

Date of original listing: June 3, 1977 ([42 FR 28543](#)) including critical habitat

Additional reclassification rules: N/A

Methodology used to complete the review: In accordance with section 4(c)(2) of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (Act), the purpose of a status review is to assess each threatened species or endangered species to determine whether its status has changed and if it should be classified differently or removed from the Lists of Threatened and Endangered Wildlife and Plants. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) evaluated the biology, habitat, and threats of the St. Croix ground lizard to inform this status review. In conducting this 5-year status review, we relied on the best available information pertaining to historical and contemporary distribution, life history, genetics, habitat, and threats of this species. We announced initiation of this review and requested information in a published Federal Register notice with a 60-day comment period on May 11, 2023 (88 FR 30324) and received no public comments. The primary sources of information used in this analysis were the species' final listing rule (42 FR 28543), previous 5-year status review (Service 2013, 2019b), species recovery plans (Service 1984, 2019a), peer reviewed scientific publications, unpublished studies and survey reports, and notes and personal communications from other qualified individuals. All recommendations resulting from this review are the result of thoroughly reviewing the best available information on the St. Croix ground lizard.

FR Notice citation announcing the species is under active review:

May 11, 2023 ([88 FR 30324](#))

Species' Recovery Priority Number at start of 5-year review ([48 FR 43098](#)): 8C, signifying a species with moderate degree of threat and high recovery potential. The conflict symbol "C" reflects the potential effects of land development on the species.

Review History: There are two previous 5-year status review for this species. First one completed on August 21, 2013 ([Service 2013](#)), and the second one completed on September 16, 2019 ([Service 2019a](#)). These reviews recommended no status change.

REVIEW ANALYSIS

Listed Entity

Taxonomy and nomenclature:

An analysis of the phylogenetics of this species resulted in a change of genus from *Ameiva polops* to *Pholidoscelis polops*. Details of this taxonomic change are described by Goicoechea et al. (2016). The Integrated Taxonomic Information System (ITIS) currently shows *Ameiva* as an invalid standing. The currently valid taxonomic genus for this species is *Pholidoscelis* (https://www.itis.gov/servlet/SingleRpt/SingleRpt?search_topic=TSN&search_value=1172734#null). This updated nomenclature does not impact our assessment of the listed entity, and it is still considered a valid entity by the Service. Until we finalize a technical correction of the name, we will continue to reference the species using the name as it was listed.

Distinct Population Segment (DPS)

The Act defines species as including any subspecies of fish or wildlife or plants, and any distinct population segment of any species of vertebrate wildlife. This species was not listed as a DPS, and we have no new information that would indicate the species should be listed as a DPS under the Service's 1996 DPS Policy.

Recovery Criteria

Recovery Plan or Outline:

- Recovery Plan for the St. Croix Ground Lizard, March 29, 1984 (Service 1984).
- Amendment to the Recovery Plan for the endangered St. Croix ground lizard, October 27, 2019 (Service 2019a).

Recovery plans are not regulatory documents and intended to provide guidance to the Service, States, and other partners on methods of minimizing threats to listed species and on criteria that may be used to determine when recovery is achieved. If the recovery criteria defined in the plan are still valid, meeting recovery criteria can indicate that the species no longer requires protections under the ESA. However, when recommending whether a listed species should be delisted, the Service must apply the factors in section 4(a) of the Act (84 FR 45020).

Based on the 2019 Recovery Plan amendment (Service 2019a), the St. Croix ground lizard will be considered for delisting when the following criteria are met:

1. Establish two (2) additional populations that show a stable or increasing trend, evidenced by natural recruitment and multiple age classes (addresses Factor C, and E).
2. Existing three [sic] (4) populations on Buck Island, Protestant Cay, Ruth Cay, and Green Cay show a stable or increasing trend, evidenced by natural recruitment and multiple age classes (addresses Factor A, C, and E).

3. Threats have been addressed and/or managed to the extent that the species will remain viable into the foreseeable future (addresses Factor A, and C).

We note here an error in the language of criterion 2, which has contradictory numbers. This should read “Existing four (4) populations...”. At this time, none of the delisting criteria have been met.

Biology and Habitat Summary

Additional details on the biology and life history of the St. Croix ground lizard can be found in the previous 5-year status review (Service 2013, 2019b), original recovery plan (Service 1984), and references therein. The St. Croix ground lizard is a small ground lizard (adults 50-90 mm snout-vent length) that currently only occurs in four offshore islands and cays on St. Croix: Protestant Cay, Green Cay, Buck Island, and Ruth Cay (Figure 1). It is considered extirpated from the main island of St. Croix since the late 1960s.

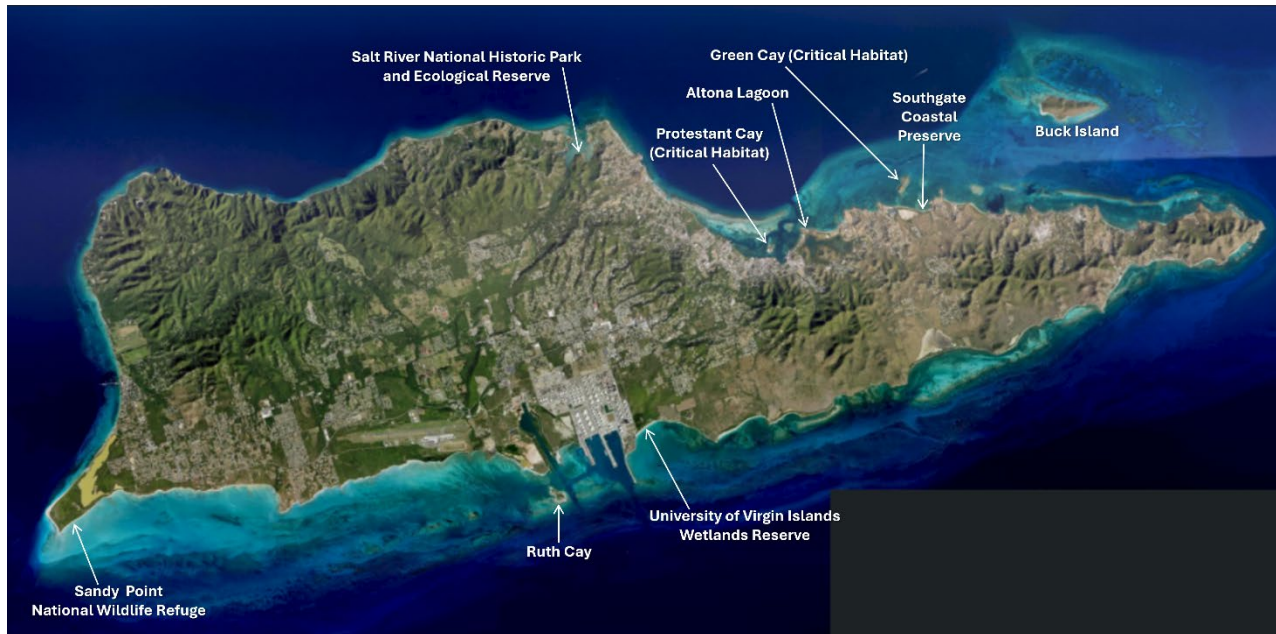


Figure 1. Locations and critical habitat of the St. Croix ground lizard populations and other areas in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), referenced in this review.

Current population estimates suggest there may be roughly around 2,000 individuals across the four populations, most of which reside on the Buck Island population (Angeli and Fitzgerald 2020). The current population estimates, and last estimated date are (references and additional information can be found below):

- St. Croix (2022): 26 individuals introduced in 2022.
- Ruth Cay (2017): 99 (estimated population size of 215)
- Protestant Cay (2023): 129 (CI: 113-148) (estimated population size of 100-300)
- Green Cay (2018): 61 (CI: 34-97)
- Buck Island (2013): 1,473 (estimated population size of 940-1,802)

1. St. Croix

The St. Croix ground lizard was extirpated from the main island of St. Croix by the late 1960's, however, a couple of small populations (13 individuals each) were reintroduced to Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge and the University of the Virgin Islands Wetlands Reserve in 2022. The viability of this population is currently unknown. A summary about this reintroduction and future reintroduction potential can be found below.

- U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR 2022): In February 2022, 26 lizards were translocated from Buck Island and distributed evenly among two sites: 13 lizards (9 females and 4 males) to the Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge and 13 lizards (9 females and 4 males) to the University of the Virgin Islands Wetlands Reserve (Figure 1). To initially ensure the reintroduced lizards' safety, three anti-predator enclosures were built at both sites. In June 2022, the enclosures were opened so lizards could disperse on their own. Remote camera photos and observations indicated some lizards dispersed outside of the enclosures. Although some St. Croix ground lizard dispersion was documented, the status of these lizards is unknown. One important observation documented a juvenile St. Croix ground lizard born inside one of the enclosures at Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge, marking the first recorded birth of the species on St. Croix since its extirpation in the late 1960s.
- Stevens (pers. comm. 2025): In the summer of 2023, researchers from Texas A&M University and the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources surveyed introduced mammal populations in Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge, University of the Virgin Islands Wetlands, Salt River National Historic Park and Ecological Preserve, and Altona Lagoon (Figure 1). Mongooses, rodents (*Rattus* spp.), and cats (*Felis catus*) were detected, indicating potential predators on introduced ground lizards.
- U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR 2025): This project also undertook a habitat restoration project at Altona Lagoon (Figure 1) to support the future reintroduction of additional St. Croix ground lizards to its native habitat on St. Croix.

2. Green Cay National Wildlife Refuge

Green Cay is a 14-acre uninhabited island with a maximum elevation of 21 m (69 ft), located less than 500 m (1640 ft) offshore the northeastern side of St. Croix. Green Cay National Wildlife Refuge is one of two islands that supports a naturally occurring population of the St. Croix ground lizards and invasive predators are currently absent.

The previous estimated population abundance on Green Cay was 413 St. Croix ground lizards (Treglia and Fitzgerald 2010). New updated survey information for Green Cay became available last year and a summary is provided below (Angeli 2024). However, due to differences in survey type and effort, we cannot make certain comparisons about population size and trends between the older and newer surveys. Part of the objectives for the newer

survey efforts was to establish a standard, consistent and replicable survey method to reduce uncertainty when assessing lizard abundance and trends for all four current populations (Angeli 2014, 2017).

- Angeli (2024): Updated population surveys were conducted in May 2013 and biannually in 2014, 2015, and 2018 (Table 1).

Table 1. St. Croix ground lizard abundance estimates in Green Cay National Wildlife Refuge from 2013-2018 (Angeli 2024).

Year	Abundance (Confidence Interval)
2013	102 (84-118)
2014	94 (76-113)
2015	87 (67-110)
2018	61 (34-97)

More recent and consistent surveys were also completed in a biannual basis from 2021 to 2024, but abundance estimates for the entire island have not yet been calculated. However, a recruitment rate of lizards (i.e., growth) was calculated for 14 seasons of wet and dry climate periods between 2013-2018 and 2021-2024, indicating “an overall population that was replacing itself and growing in seven of the 14 seasons, most of those years since intervention after 2021 to improve habitat and reduce predation pressure on Green Cay National Wildlife Refuge” (Table 4 in Angeli 2024).

- St. Croix Environmental Association (2024): There is an ongoing habitat restoration project funded by the Service’s Coastal Program that seeks to increase suitable habitat on Green Cay for the St. Croix ground lizard by planting native trees and shrubs and removal of invasive plants such as guinea grass. After two years of this project, there are visible improvements and expansion to the lizard in Green Cay. In addition, the number of lizards has apparently increased in the survey plots closest to the habitat restoration work. These projects are being conducted through a cooperative agreement with the St. Croix Environmental Association in collaboration with the Service, the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, the National Park Service, the St. Croix Sea Turtle Project, and the University of the Virgin Islands.

3. Protestant Cay

Protestant Cay is a 3-acre island with a maximum elevation of 33 meters (108 ft), located less than 150 m (492 ft) offshore the north coast of St. Croix. This cay is one of two islands that supports a naturally occurring population of the St. Croix ground lizard and where rodents continue to occur (Stevens pers. comm. 2025). This small cay is home to Hotel on the Cay, which operations covers a large portion of the island and is considered a source of threats for the St. Croix ground lizard (see Threats section).

Previous St. Croix ground lizard abundance estimates for Protestant Cay resulted in 64 (CI 53 - 85) lizards within the eight sampling plots (Angeli 2017, DPNR 2023b) or roughly between 100-300 lizards for the entire Cay (Angeli 2018, Service 2019b). A more recent survey completed during May 2023, resulted in an estimated abundance of 129 (CI 113-149) lizards within the plots (DPNR 2023b). This abundance estimate is within the previous estimate of 100-300 individuals.

4. Ruth Cay

Ruth Cay is an 18.2-acre manmade uninhabited island with an elevation of 5 m (16.4 ft), located less than 500 m (1640 ft) offshore the south-central side of St. Croix. Protestant Cay is one of two islands that supports an introduced St. Croix ground lizard population and where rodents continue to occur as well (Stevens pers. comm. 2025).

A 2007 St. Croix ground lizard estimate for Ruth Cay resulted in an abundance of 170 lizards (Treglia and Fitzgerald 2008). In July 2017, a survey resulted in count of 49 individuals within the survey plots and an extrapolated abundance of 245 lizards for the entire Cay (Angeli 2017). Additional surveys were conducted by the Department of Planning and Natural Resources in June 2023, but estimates are not yet available.

5. Buck Island Reef National Monument

Buck Island Reef National Monument (Buck Island) is a 176-acre island with a maximum elevation of 104 meters (340 ft), located approximately 3 km (492 ft) offshore the northeast coast of St. Croix. Buck Island supports an introduced St. Croix ground lizard population and is free from introduced predators. The species was introduced to this Island in 2008, and this population is the largest and best the representation of a self-sustaining St. Croix ground lizard population (Service 2019b). Based on surveys conducted in May 2013, the St. Croix ground lizard population abundance for this Island was estimated in 1,473 (CI 940-1,802) individuals, with future predictions of over 8,000 individuals as the species continues to disperse throughout the Buck Island (Angeli et al. 2018).

- Stevens (pers. comm. 2025): Updated lizard surveys were completed in October 2019 across 15 plots in Buck Island. Preliminary results estimated 16 individuals per plot (range of 4 to 51 lizards), and documented lizards on the east side of Buck Island, on the opposite side from the initial translocation area on the west side indicating the species has now dispersed across the island. Models support that lizards now occupy all of Buck Island and that the abundance is higher than the May 2013 estimate. Data analyses for the October 2019 survey is still ongoing and final abundance estimates will eventually be published.

Threats (Five-Factor Analysis) Summary

The status of a species is determined from an assessment of factors specified in section 4(a)(1) of the Act, including: Factor A: the present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range; Factor B: overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes; Factor C: disease or predation; Factor D: the inadequacy of existing

regulatory mechanisms; Factor E: other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence. A summary of this assessment is detailed below.

At the time of listing, the major threats to the St. Croix ground lizard were habitat destruction and modification (Factor A), and predation (Factor C). Currently, the species continues to be threatened by the same factors and others as established in the previous 5-year status reviews (Service 2013, 2019b). Main threats continue to be habitat related (i.e., hotel management actions (Factor A), sea level rise (Factor E)) and predation by invasive mammals (mongoose, cats and rats; Factor C). Factors B is not considered as threats to the species.

The population on Protestant Cay continues to be threatened by habitat modification related to the operation, redevelopment, and expansion of its only hotel. Hotel on the Cay continues to operate and has redevelopment plans in the future (<https://www.vi.gov/governor-bryan-sends-signed-lease-agreement-to-legislature-for-approval-of-hotel-on-the-cay-redevelopment-project/>). Current hotel users have access to most of the island. The potential expansion or remodeling of the structures of the Hotel on the Cay is a threat that has been identified since listing and may pose additional threats if appropriate conservation measures are not implemented. A particular incident observed by the Department of Planning and Natural Resources staff while conducting a site visit (May 2023) was the burning of a large pile of vegetation that had accumulated over several years as part of hotel's landscaping practices, and where numerous St. Croix ground lizards had been previously observed (DPNR 2023a). Although no direct impacts on the species were identified, the incident was documented, including burned *Agave eggersiana* individuals, a federally endangered plant. The Department of Planning and Natural Resources staff provided technical assistance to the Hotel on the Cay management regarding these practices (DPNR 2023a). Since this 2023 incident, we are not aware of any other incident that may have affected the St. Croix ground lizard or its habitat on Protestant Cay. The Service will continue to work together with the Hotel on the Cay management towards the conservation of the St. Croix ground lizard.

Predation continues to be a threat in Protestant Cay (rats), Ruth Cay (rats), and in St. Croix (rats, cats, and mongoose). Standard pest management has been underway on Protestant Cay to control the population of rodents, but eradication and a biosecurity plan should be implemented (Service 2019b, Stevens pers. comm. 2025). In the previous species review, green iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) were mentioned as a potential new predatory threat on Protestant Cay (Service 2019b). However, there is no reliable information suggesting a negative impact from green iguanas on the St. Croix ground lizard in any populations. Thus, green iguanas are not currently considered a threat to the St. Croix ground lizard.

The species is currently protected in the U.S. Virgin Islands by the Virgin Island Code, Title 12 – Chapter 2; Protection of Indigenous, Endangered and Threatened Fish, Wildlife and Plants of the Endangered and Indigenous Species Act of 1990. The purpose of this Chapter is to protect, conserve and manage indigenous fish, wildlife and plants, and endangered or threatened species for the ultimate benefit of all Virgin Islanders, now and in the future. Section 105 of this Chapter prohibits the harassment, injury or killing, or the attempt to do the same, or sell or offer for sale any specimen, or parts or products of an endangered or threatened species. However, even with this protection, existing regulations are currently inadequate to protect some populations of this

species from threats like predators and sea level rise, and without knowledge of the species some activities like those on Protestant Cay may have unintended impacts (Factor D).

Three of the four populations of the St. Croix ground lizard occur on relatively low elevation cays (i.e., Protestant, Ruth and Green cays). Thus, these relatively small St. Croix ground lizard populations will continue to be exposed to the effects of sea level rise and storm surge, particularly from hurricanes (Service 2019b). This includes shoreline erosion and the subsequent loss of habitat that supports St. Croix ground lizard populations. Protestant Cay and Ruth Cay are the most vulnerable to these impacts because of their lower elevation (Service 2019b).

Synthesis

The St. Croix ground lizard is a small ground lizard that has been listed as endangered since 1977. It is considered extirpated from the main island of St. Croix since the late 1960s and currently only occurs in four offshore islands and cays on St. Croix: Protestant Cay, Green Cay, Buck Island, and Ruth Cay.

One crucial step towards recovery occurred in 2022, when several lizards were translocated from Buck Island to Sandy Point NWR and to the University of Virgins Islands wetlands. Although the status of these lizards is unknown, one juvenile was born within one of the enclosures and some lizards were observed dispersing. The Buck Island population continues as the largest (well over 1,000 individuals) and best representation of a self-sustaining St. Croix ground lizard population, particularly since it's the only population that occurs without the invasive mammal threat. The significantly smaller populations on Protestant and Green cays are estimated to have less than 200 lizards each, and Ruth Cay is estimated to have less than 300 lizards. Due to differences in survey effort, we cannot make certain comparisons about population size and trends for Protestant, Green, and Ruth cays. The Buck Island population is the only one that is confidently known to have a positive population trend and range expansion since its introduction in 2008.

Main threats to the species continue to be habitat related (i.e., management of Hotel on the Cay and sea level rise) and predation by invasive mammals (i.e., rats on the cays in addition to mongoose and cats in St. Croix). Protestant and Ruth Cays seem to be the most susceptible to sea level rise because of their lower elevation. The three smallest populations (i.e., Protestant, Green and Ruth cays) are the most vulnerable to threats. Because of continued threats to the species and limited information estimating population trends, we recommend that the species still be considered as endangered.

RECOMMENDED FUTURE ACTIVITIES

Recovery Activities

- Implement a habitat management plan with Hotel on the Cay and U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources, particularly for vegetation and debris management, and provide technical assistance for any remodeling plans of the facilities.
- Develop and implement a rat eradication plan in Protestant Cay and Ruth Cay.
- Continue efforts to improve habitat in all cays.

- Continue reintroductions efforts in St Croix using information from a recent habitat suitability model and identified potential St. Croix ground lizard reintroduction sites: Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge, Altona Lagoon, and Southgate Coastal Preserve (Angeli and Fitzgerald 2020).

Monitoring / Research Activities

- Continue the standard and systematic surveys efforts to assess the St. Croix ground lizard abundance and trends.
- Assess the species and its habitat vulnerability to climate change and sea-level rise.

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RESULTS

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Status Review of the St. Croix ground lizard**

Status Recommendation:

On the basis of this review, we recommend the following status for this species ([50 CFR § 424.11](#)). A 5-year review presents a recommendation of the species status. Any change to the status requires a separate rulemaking process that includes public review and comment, as defined in the ESA.

- Downlist to Threatened
- Uplist to Endangered
- Delist (*Indicate reasons for delisting per 50 CFR 424.11*):
 - The species is extinct*
 - The species does not meet the definition of an endangered or threatened species.*
 - The listed entity does not meet the statutory definition of a species.*
- No change needed

FIELD OFFICE APPROVAL:

Field Supervisor, Caribbean Ecological Services Field Office, Fish and Wildlife Service

Approve _____