

## A UNIQUE AMPHIBIAN ON A POSTAGE STAMP

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Of the three Orders of animals within Class Amphibia, only two are easily identified by the general public: the frogs and toads in Order Anura (meaning “without tails”), and the salamanders and newts in Order Caudata (meaning “tailed,” also called Urodela).

The amphibians that are generally unknown (and unrecognized) are in Order Gymnophiona (meaning “snakelike”), also grouped as Order Apoda (“without legs”), but commonly referred to as caecilians.

ATA Handbook 165, which is now being finalized for publication, lists nearly 2,000 postage stamps illustrating amphibians on stamps worldwide. Of these, 1,780 are examples of Order Anura while the remaining 135 listed stamps illustrate those amphibians in Order Caudata.

At the time the handbook was prepared in 2016, not a single stamp from any country in the world was known to illustrate a caecilian. This may be due to the fact that these forms are most commonly found underground where they burrow out of sight beneath the surface of the earth, or live out of sight in water.

At the time Handbook 165 was submitted for publication, and too late to include additions to the listing of amphibians on postage stamps, the author found—almost by accident—a single stamp of a caecilian on a souvenir sheet from the Central African Republic released in 2001.

The miniature sheet of six stamps (Sc#1395a–f), titled “Reptiles d’Afrique Centrale,” depicts five reptiles and one amphibian, the Mexican Burrowing Caecilian.

The worm-like caecilian is correctly identified and labeled as *Dermophis mexicanus*, and appears in the lower right corner of the sheet (S#1395f).

While most caecilians are a drab color, this species has a purple exterior, as illustrated here.

It is likely that the designer of this sheet believed that this long, thin, legless animal was a snake, which would have correctly placed it as a reptile. However caecilians are true amphibians, although with special adaptations which serve them in their unique lifestyle.

The eyes of most individuals in Order Gymnophiona are reduced, their body is usually ringed with grooves (which aids in mobility), and they show no evidence of legs. These amphibians do have a well-developed mouth, with teeth in the upper and lower jaw, and a tail that may be very short or have several hundred vertebrae.

True to the developmental pattern of Class Amphibia, the caecilians do go through a metamorphosis from a gill-breathing larval form to a lung-breathing adult form. All known caecilians live in tropical regions and adults generally range in size (depending on species) from about four inches to five feet in length.



*Dermophis mexicanus*  
Central Africa, 2001, Sc#1395f

An image of *Dermophis mexicanus* taken from the internet clearly shows the caecilian characteristics described above.

The most recent classification divided the caecilians into nine families containing almost 200 species. A tenth family has recently been discovered.

Their diets are not well known. It appears that they feed on insects and invertebrates found in their habitat.

