

Pick on someone duller than you

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WHEN deciding whether to get into a fight, the size of an opponent is unimportant to a male Augrabies flat lizard (*Platysaurus broadleyi*). What they really care about is whose throat reflects the most ultraviolet light.

The lizards, native to South Africa, challenge each other by twisting their multicoloured bodies to expose dark blue throats.

Martin Whiting of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, and his colleagues dimmed the reflectiveness of the throats of 54 males with UV-blocking sunscreen and noticed that challenges by treated lizards were twice as likely to escalate into violence as normal (*Biology Letters*, DOI: 10.1098/rsbl.2005.0419).

Previous studies have shown that if a fight actually takes place, the lizard with the most reflective scales is most likely to win, possibly because it tallies with superior physical, genetic or immunological fitness. Whiting thinks that the lizards use reflectance to size each other up, and only fight if they stand a chance of winning. "Instinctively they know that if you have pure UV, then you're a better fighter."

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A note from Martin Whiting: Jessica Stapley was the PI on this study and was responsible for working out a protocol for reducing UV reflectiveness and conducting the experiments in the field.