

# The Texas Horned Lizard

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Horny Toads are neither frogs nor toads. As members of the reptile family, they are technically **Horned Lizards**. But if you grew up in Texas, it's a horny toad.



## Why is the Texas Horned Lizard on the endangered species list?

Most older Texans have had, at one time or another, a horny toad for a pet. Its appeal is the combination of a fierce appearance and a surprisingly pleasant personality. You can hold one in your hand, turn it over on its back, and stroke its belly until it dozes off. Unfortunately, the horny toad's appeal is in part responsible for the rapid decline. In the fifties and early sixties, every tourist trap on every Texas highway sold horny toads as souvenirs. Some collectors gathered hundreds of thousands in a single year by paying schoolchildren a nickel for each one they brought in. Out of their natural home, the animals died, and so the state began protecting the Texas Horned Lizard in 1967. Today it is illegal even to own one as the Texas Horned Lizard is now a state-listed threatened species (federal category C2).

A second factor in the demise of the horny toad was pesticides. Chemical sprays that didn't kill the creature itself killed harvester ants, its main food supply. Urbanization also hurt horny toads as widespread construction tore up their habitat. They actually liked highway asphalt, which retained enough heat to make an ideal lounging spot. But because horny toads instinctively freeze when they see movement, cars flattened them left and right. Nevertheless, there are still horny toads in Texas.

Horny toads survive by eating a variety of insects, but they are ant specialists. A horny toad eats dozens of ants in one sitting. They quietly wait in open areas for unsuspecting prey, and then snatch them up with a flick of their tongue. Their foraging habits put them in danger, though, and they do fall prey to many larger predators. In fact, horny toads are a frequent item in the diet of hawks and snakes.

## How does a horny toad defend itself?

When threatened, their first reaction is to flatten out and freeze in place. This enables the horned lizard to blend in with the ground as well as reduce the casting of a body shadow. Unfortunately, many horny toads are killed because they bask on roadways and simply don't move when a car approaches. Another defensive reaction is to run briefly then suddenly stop to seemingly create the illusion of disappearance. When



disturbed or in an extremely agitated state, they are capable of inflating their body and hissing.

The horned lizard have large cavities in their head. The elaborate blood circulation system in its head is responsible for an amazing ability of the horny toad, one that many people still believe is a myth; **it squirts blood from its eyes!** The horny toad resorts to this scare tactic when it is trapped or afraid, forcing its blood pressure to rise so rapidly that the cavities in its head fill up and burst at the corners of its eyes, spraying whatever is scaring it with blood to deter the predator.

There are three species of horny toad in Texas. The kind most of us know is the Texas Horned Lizard (*Phrynosoma Cornutum*), which is found all over the state. It measures from three to five inches, though a hatchling may barely reach an inch. Young are born in late summer or early fall. Despite their name, horny toads usually mate only once a year.



Texas Horned Lizards range from the South-Central United States to Northern Mexico. They can be found in arid and semiarid habitats in open areas with sparse plant cover throughout much of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and New Mexico. As horned lizards dig for hibernation, nesting and insulation purposes, they commonly are found in loose sand or loamy soils.

Hibernation begins in September or October, and continues until late April or May. Mating occurs soon after emergence. After a receptive female and male mate, the female will carry the eggs for a period of time as they develop. Once a nest site is chosen, she will dig a slanted tunnel and lay 13 to 45 eggs in two to three soil packed layers. After burying the eggs, she may sit on the entrance tunnel for one night, but then she leaves, never to return to the eggs again. Some five to nine weeks later, the baby lizards will hatch and fight their way out of the egg with a specialized "egg tooth."

Horny toads are really sweet creatures. When I was growing up, you couldn't walk outside the house without stepping on one! Along with fireflies, they were everywhere. We are fortunate enough to have a few running around our back yard. If you're lucky, you might enjoy their company during your stay here at Annie's Cottage.

You can see pictures of horny toads taken on the cottages property on the next page.

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As you can (or cannot!) see, in their natural environment horned lizards are difficult to see.



Click on the thumbnails below to see additional pictures taken on our property.



The Texas Parks & Wildlife now offers a commemorative plate for this endangered species. Click on the plate for pricing and information.



The information used in the preceding pages was obtained, in part, from the following 3 sources. Here are their links.

[Horned Lizard Conservation Society \(Texas Chapter\)](#)

[The Texas "Horny Toad"](#)

[Horned Lizards in Texas](#)