



Letters to Nature Kids

June, 2024 ∞ Number 19



A Texas horned lizard

Dear Nature Kids,

Some friends and I went to see horned lizards, and I'd like to tell you about it. They don't live around Dallas-Fort Worth anymore, but we can still find them in western parts of Texas.

Horned lizards? You know, "horny toads." TCU made them their sports mascot and calls them "horned frogs." But as you probably know, frogs and toads are amphibians, and not at all like our scaly lizard friends.

∞ continued on the next page

The kind that we saw, the Texas horned lizard, has a bony frill at the back of its head. That frill has sharp pointed scales around the sides and two sharp horns at the back. There are lots of spiny scales all over its body and short tail.



Thistles and a prickly poppy at Copper Breaks State Park

We went to a place called Copper Breaks State Park, 200 miles northwest of Fort Worth. It can be a pretty hot and dry place, with trails that let you walk through areas with cactus, mesquite trees, and lots of grasses and flowers. The four of us were glad to see so many flowers at the end of May.

We also saw lots of colonies of big red harvester ants. That was good news, because those ants are the things horned lizards love to eat the most. That seems pretty amazing, since harvester ants are big and their sting hurts. But a horned lizard will find one of the little paths the ants use and lap them up as they come by, like those little snacks labeled as "flamin' hot."

Actually I'm pretty sure the ant is not spicy, but the sting would be. Here's how they do it: the lizard generates a lot of mucus (like sticky spit) in the back of its mouth. When swallowed, the ant winds up in a glob of it so that it would have a hard time biting or stinging.

That's a lot of trouble to go to, just to eat ants. But they have adapted so that they can live in hot and dry places, eating things most other critters will not. That's the horned lizard's job, and they're good at it.

About 11:00am, as it was getting pretty hot in the state park, we spotted a horned lizard. As we took photos and got closer, it scooted ahead a few feet and stopped, looking back to see if we were still following. In this way, by not getting too close, we got several photos.



The first Texas horned lizard runs into a second one

Then our little horned friend moved over near taller vegetation, and there was another one! The two lizards stood still for a while, probably checking each other out and watching to see how close the humans were coming. One of them bobbed his head, a way of saying to the other one, "This is my space; I'm in charge here."

What a great couple of days my friends and I had out there! The next day we visited Matador Wildlife Management Area, a little further west of Copper Breaks. We drove the dusty roads and looked out over the plains, and we saw several more Texas horned lizards.

What about you? Have you seen horned lizards? It has been many years since we could find one around Fort Worth. If you live in West or South Texas, or if you visit a place like Copper Breaks State Park, you might see one. If you do, please don't get too close or try to catch them. It is illegal to pick one up and take it home, and they usually die when people do that. Some zoos are expert enough to keep them healthy, and they have permission to do so.



*At Matador Wildlife Management Area (WMA), near Paducah.
The public can access this and other WMA's if they have a hunting license or limited public use permit.*

There's a lot more to know about horned lizards, like which animals try to eat them and how they defend themselves. You might look for a copy of Jane Manaster's book, *Horned Lizards*, or Wade Sherbrooke's book, *Introduction to Horned Lizards of North America*. And you might think about joining the Horned Lizard Conservation Society, <http://www.hornedlizards.org>.

✍ Michael

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