



Our purpose is to document and publicize the values and conservation needs of horned lizards, to promote horned lizard conservation projects, and to assist with horned lizard management initiatives throughout their ranges.

Volume 19, Issue No. 2

MAY 2014

his wife Sally and

chose to place

it into Wildlife

Management.

We wish to thank

Richard for his in-

vitation to perform

this survey and

his ranch hand's

great hospitality

during our stay.

A great survey

sembled for this

including Lee Ann

team was as-

daunting task

Linam, Tanya

Phillips, Chuck

HLCS Members Blaze the Trails of Blue Mountain Peak Ranch in Search of Horned Lizards

by Perry Hudson

HLCS members ioined Texas Parks and Wildlife Biological Inventory Team (BIT) volunteers searching Blue Mountain Peak Ranch on the western edge of the Edward's Plateau. This beautiful property is a winner of TPWD's Lone Star Steward Land award and it was easy to see why. So much effort has been made to re-



Phrynosoma cornutum - Texas Horned Lizard. Photo by Mark Pyle.

turn this land to its native environment. The property boasts the highest peak in the area (2135' above sea level). I had the good fortune to camp on the top of the peak and the stars were spectacular at night. The property is over 830 acres covering about 1¹/₄ square miles. The property's owner, Richard Taylor, purchased this land with

The Horned Lizard Conservation Society organized a wonderful survey last summer and we are publishing two articles regarding this spectacular survey, one from Perry Hudson and one from Clint King. Reburn, Rollo Newsom, Carolyn Todd, Jim Baines, Ruthann Panipinto, Perry Hudson, Mark Pyle (with help), Thom Marshall, Leslie Nossaman, Fannie Messec, Bill Brooks, Tim Tristan, Reilly Dibner, and Ryan Blankenship. I say that we blazed the trail as the temperatures sored way into the triple digits during our surveys but team members were never daunted. This being my first survey adventure, three things impressed me. First, the team loves what they do and will not stop until they accomplish their goals. Second, they have great camaraderie and share

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such a passion for the goals of the Horned Lizard Conservation Society. Finally, the tenacity of seeing people diving into bushes, ravines, and fissures, anywhere to see if they could catalog species without harming was astounding.

Obviously our main goal was to confirm whether this property was supporting the illusive horned lizard. Prospects were high, as research teams from Texas Tech had confirmed that habitats were rehabilitated to support the lizard's proliferation. This was such a learning experience for me as I was given examples of what all to search for in a vast rugged environment. It was obvious to us upon our first venture out that indeed the food source was extremely prevalent. There was thousands of harvester ant beds. There were ambush trails for the lizards, this was a given as well. Unfortunately, following our first 8 hours of searching, all teams came up empty. Other lizard species were found during this time but even they were far and few between.

After dinner, teams chose to take on a nocturnal blitz as well. We were very fortunate in that members were also experts in hexapods. I found this fascinating but I must say in a humorous point that while I love reptiles and amphibians, bugs scare me to death! Many interesting species were found at night using a catch sheet and UV lighting. Over the night period and many miles driving, a few small Western Diamond-



Back row left to right: Fannie Messec, Bill Brooks, Carolyn Todd, Rollo Newson, Jennifer Pyle, Mark Pyle, Tim Sellers. Front row left to right: Ruth Panipinto, Lee Ann Linam, Perry Hudson, and Leslie Nossaman. Photo by Fannie Messec.

backs were found but even their scarcity suggested the drought certainly is affecting animal sightings. A great high point was when several members spotted a group of ringedtailed cats in a tree.

Up bright and early the next day, the team hit the ground excited to have success. Still, after 5 hours of searching, no one



Bark Scorpion with moth. Photo by Mark Pyle.

was having success. We were hot and frustrated and were questioning what size population of our horned toad existed here, if any. In an act that must have been divine providence, most teams headed down toward the southern edge of the property for one last look before packing up and there it was, standing proudly in the road! Everyone slammed on the brakes and leapt out to confirm what we could only hope to be true: our success had been realized. A small adult horned lizard was there for us to witness together. My eyes filled with tears, as I had not seen one in the wild for 40 years. All of the necessary measurements were made and confirmed for reporting purposes; photos were taken, and then off the lizard went like a shot!

While it is obvious that the

HLCS Members Blaze the Trails ... - continued from page 3

property certainly meets environmental needs of these wonderful animals, populations do seem low. It is with hope that predation and lack of invasive species will allow this animal to rebound and take this land back to be a home without risk of being interfered with. Unfortunately, there are challenges that the property owners face and they are working diligently to resolve. For instance. I was not aware of the effect feral hogs can have on horned toad populations. We saw evidence of hog destruction to the environment everywhere. This being said, the owners have a very aggressive program in place to remove these animals to help and minimize this damage. We also saw colonies of red fire ants, which are very harmful to both the horned lizard's food source - the harvester ant as well as a horned lizard's young. The owners have a very aggressive control plan in place for the fire ant as well. We assisted while we were performing our survey by marking fire ant mounds so that they can go back and perform control methods.

I have to say that this survey was a success even though animals were very elusive. Again, it would seem that a drought lasting so long has slowed things but the property is primed to be a wonderful wildlife habitat. In all, 18 species were identified including:

Sceloporus olivaceus - Texas spiny lizard Cophosaurus texanus - Greater earless lizard Sceloporus consobrinus - Prairie lizard Urosaurus ornatus - Ornate tree lizard Masticophis flagellum testaceus - Western coach whip snake

Crotalus atrox - Western diamondback rattlesnake

whip snake Odocoileus virginianus – White Tail Deer Meleagris gallopavo – Wild turkey Lepus californicus – Jackrabbit Geococcyx californianus - Roadrunner Aphelocoma californica – Western scrub jay Holbrookia lacerate – Spot tailed earless lizard

Masticophis taeniatus girardi - Central Texas

Pyrocephalus rubinus – Vermillion flycatcher Bassariscus astutus – Ringed tailed Cat Phrynosoma cornutum - Texas Horned Lizard Holbrookia maculate – Common lesser earless lizard

Aspidoscelis sexlineata – Six-lined racerunner lizard

Thanks again to Richard Taylor for inviting us to conduct this survey. If you know of a landowner interested in having a Biological Inventory Team perform a survey on their property, please have them contact Marsha May at marsha.may@ tpwd.texas.gov.



Phrynosoma cornutum - Texas Horned Lizard. Photo by Fannie Messec.



Phrynosoma cornutum - Texas Horned Lizard. Photo by Jim Baines.



Holbrookia maculata - Common lesser earless lizard. Photo by Fannie Messec.

Phrynosomatics May 2014

Late Summer Searching for *Phyrnosoma* and More on the Fringe of the Texas Hill Country

By Clint King

The pastel black pattern of a Central Texas whip snake materialized as a blur in the heat-withered yellow grass that surrounded the rock wall I had been precariously making my way around. It had been a prematurely hot and unproductive morning, and so I sprang into the sort of super-human action that only the sight of a highly sought-after reptile or amphibian species can produce in me. I had been wanting to get pictures of this lighting fast, diurnal predator of mice and lizards for many years, and while I had found my fair share of them, getting my hands on a live one had been a different matter. I saw my chance here and now, though, as the four foot long colubrid made for the safety of the rock wall and did the trademark whip snake disappearing act on me. I called out to Ryan Blankenship, my partner in crime, in the traditional form and dialect: "Snake!"

Ryan sprang into action, and we began making short work of a sizable section of the rock wall. In no time we had reduced the former wall into a disarrayed pile of limestone rubble. Only a single flat slab lay at the bottom. "Okay, it has to be under this one!" I announced the obvious. With team effort we overturned the final stone, which was massive, and I prepared to make the split-second crucial grab. A state of confusion fell over me



Masticophis taeniatus girardi - Central Texas whip snake. Photo by Mark Pyle.

as the rock was flipped, only to discover nothing beneath it but a few harvestmen scurrying from the sudden flood of sunlight. A grass-lined mouse nest lay at the center of this mandala, and comprehension fell on me. The whip snake had escaped once again. As I dug through the mouse nest, I heard Ryan behind me yell, "There it is!" Spinning on my heels, I followed his extended finger to a patch of dried hackberry leaves, where the large-eyed, almost ornithian head of the whip snake protruded, with a smile that almost reflected pride.

I made the grab and was successful. Apparently the mouse burrow had an escape exit, because we had to pull the serpent out six inches at a time as it forced its body against the tight inner walls of the hole. Finally it came free, and the thrashing creature was extracted from the hole and secured at mid-body with my free hand.

The Central Texas whip snake is a common denizen of the western two-thirds of Texas, but it is most prevalent in the hill country south of Austin. Its close cousin, the Schott's whip snake, occurs from San Antonio south throughout the Rio Grande Valley, where it is replaced by the Ruthven's whip snake as the thorn scrub gives way to what remains of the subtropical sabal palm habitat around Brownsville. All are diurnal, heat-tolerant reptiles whose Continued on page 6

Late Summer Searching for Phrynosoma ... - continued from page 5

high metabolism and rope-thin, wiry bodies demand they chase down plenty of rodents, lizards, and smaller snakes to eat in order to survive. Usually the closest encounter the naturalist gets is a blur of striped dark and light contrasting scales as the snake seems to literally disappear before one's very eyes.

We had been on the Blue Mountain Peak Ranch since the previous evening, along with a mingled crowd of Horned Lizard Conservation Society and Dallas-Fort Worth Herpetological Society members and various representatives from Texas Parks and Wildlife. While the principle interest and focus of the trip was centered around locating and recording Texas horned lizard activity on the property, it was late August in Mason County in central Texas, complete with unbearably hot daytime temperatures and the dry, arid air that accompanies it, so any reptile or amphibian was a more than welcome one.

We had met up in nearby Mason, Texas for lunch. It was a mixed assembly of like-minded



Panorama view of the Blue Mountain Peak Ranch. Photo by Fannie Messec.

naturalists, brought together by a love, appreciation, and the accompanying desire to play a personal role in the conservation of this rapidly disappearing state protected reptile. After meeting to eat and greet, we headed out of town in a procession of vehicles for over twenty miles to the entrance of the Blue Mountain Peak Ranch. The landowner had purchased this sizable 800 acre tract of land on the edge of the picturesque Texas hill country for the very purpose of providing a

private sanctuary for wildlife in the looming face of "progressive" suburban development that has been creeping across the otherwise beautiful countryside. It is rocky country, with rolling hills composed of calciferous limestone. A thin, fairly maintained caliche road gradually ascends as one traverses it up the mountainside, and the terrain soon becomes steep.

For this reason several members opted to abandon their cars at the second gate and carpool



Following lunch in Mason, LeeAnn giving instructions how to get from Mason to Blue Mountain Peak Ranch. Leslie Nossaman and Rollo Newsom listening. Photo by Fannie Messec.



Survey members listening intently to the history, climate, research projects, and more of Blue Mountain Peak Ranch by the ranch's caretaker. Photo by Fannie Messec.

to the main guest house, which was built on the mountaintop itself. Here, the property's sole caretaker and groundskeeper delighted us with a brief history of the area and its resident *Phrynosoma*. We learned that earlier in the year several research students had been fitting the lizards with radio collars, and had succeeded in locating five individuals here.

While the plan was to team up and survey the individual hotspots in small groups, Ryan and I were antsy to hit the field, and in our eagerness we slew the itinerary and hightailed it as soon as we hit the door. In no time we found ourselves in the midst of the property alone. We followed the road across the flat, rock-strewn landscape replete with creosote, mesquite trees, and prickly pear. Small stands of live oak mixed with hackberry grew in places, and when we chanced upon a spring-fed canyon bed to our right we unanimously decided this would be a good place to start looking.

When searching for horned lizards, the key is to find a few good harvester ant mounds,

and while this was no hard task in itself. the lizards eluded us. We did find several lizard species though. The temps hovered around 100 degrees, but the greater earless lizards, which soon proved to be the most common species on the ranch, paid it no heed as they basked on large exposed boulders, their off-white bodies camouflaging them well against the like-colored limestone. These skittish, fastmoving lacertilians possess intensely contrasting black and white bands underneath their tails, which they raise in alarm whenever they are spooked. In brush piles we also found the prairie lizard, of the genus Sceloporus, or spiny lizards, so named because of their sharply pointed overlapping scales that are not unlike the surface of a pinecone. Beneath rocks in leaf litter on the canyon floor we came across the little brown skink, a glossy wriggling species of lizard that maxes out at around four inches in length. At the base of a rock pile I found a small specimen of the ornate tree lizard, another small species of spiny lizard that I had long ago become acquainted with further west, in the Trans-



Cophosaurus texanus - Greater earless lizard. Photo by Fannie Messec.

Pecos region of Texas.

Back at home base, we discovered that we weren't the only ones that had failed to find any horned lizards. No one had been able to turn one up, although several members had found and photographed a spot-tailed earless lizard, which are far less common than the abundant greater earless lizard and which can be differentiated by the double row of chocolate brown blotches that run lengthwise down their backs from the nape to the end of the tail. I was particularly jealous of this, as I have yet to find one on my own in the wild.

Late evening soon gave way to nightfall, and several of us opted to do some night-cruising in search of snakes along the two-lane farm to market road that ran in front of the property. Between two vehicles we managed to find a total of three western diamondback rattlesnakes, all juveniles. The western diamondback is probably the most common venomous snake in the western portion of the state. This prolific, opportunistic habitat generalist is a familiar sight to most naturalists that have spent a fair amount of time outdoors in their territory.

We camped out alongside a series of hog pens along the southeastern edge of the property, where a small sign hung around one such pen that read 'All Hogs Who Enter Here Go To Heaven'. I had brought along a tent but I chose rather to lie in a sleeping bag beneath the glorious star-spangled hill country night sky, with a pile of borrowed snake bags for a pillow. Meadow katydids sang me a serenade as I drifted off to sleep quickly, where I dreamt of horned lizards.

I was up with the sunrise, and Continued on page 8

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as the dream-lizards evaded me, a brisk cool morning gave way. I tried to go back to sleep, but the drive to get started herping was too hard to ignore. So I grabbed a snake hook and began wandering across the hillside below. It didn't take more than a minute or two to find a reptile. The waking sun shone a beam of golden light in a sharp wedge between two gray chunks of rock, and guided me like a beacon to a loop of diamond-adorned scaly skin. The rattlesnake was still snoozing away, and I allowed myself as close of an approach as I could safely get to snap his picture. I then marched back to camp and proclaimed the hunt officially underway.

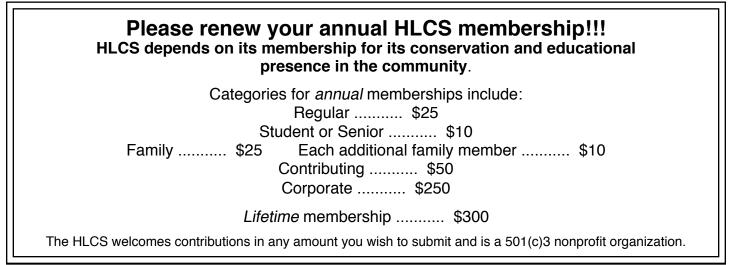
As the morning wore on we spent it searching a ravine whose bottom briefly contained an underground seepage. Here, we found the two most common anurans to the area, the northern cricket frog and the Rio Grande leopard frog. Both species are quite fond of sitting along the bank at creek-side, where they are easily startled. The water was clean and clear, and we could see them diving to the bottom alongside crayfish and submerged vegetation and willow roots. The seepages were only several inches deep at best, but they were full of life. Dragonflies hovered overhead, occasionally dipping their abdomens into the water to lay eggs. Birds flitted in between the branches of cedar trees that grew thick on both sides. Here, where the ground was constantly moist, this predominant conifer grew alongside young willow trees and stands of cattails. But we would not find horned lizards in this microhabitat, and time was wasting.

On the way back to home base, we drove up a slowly winding hill that ascended to the hilltop's highest point, where the guest house was located. As we cut across a mesquite-choked area rich with open areas of bluestem grass, I noticed a nice rock fence off to our right. Snakes often frequent rock piles on sunny, mild mornings, where they lie on the sun-warmed rocks to thermoregulate in close proximity to easily accessible shelter. They find the added benefit of finding prey plentiful here.

I abandoned the vehicle and walked over to the rock wall, my eyes scanning the ground and rocks. I came around a large mesquite tree and it was at this point that I scared up the aforementioned whip snake. A photo session ensued with several other members of the posse before the snake was released back near the stone wall to resume its sunbathing. Time was rapidly dwindling, and the sun was getting ever higher. If we were going to find a horned lizard, we were wasting precious daylight.

We tried the hilltop, above the seepage along the western fence line, as well as a live oak-dotted hill on the north end of the ranch, but turned up nothing but dozens of greater earless lizards. Eventually, time was up and we reluctantly began to head back to the truck. From there we drove back to the campsite for Ryan to pick up his tent.

We had to split off from the gravel road onto actual dirt to get to the campsite, and so were traveling at a slow rate of speed when we both saw it simultaneously. The lizard's body was flat



to the ground and camouflaged wonderfully, but its head was sticking up as it took in the sun's warming rays, and the crown of thorns that adorned it gave it away. "Horned lizard!" we both screamed as the brakes jerked us to an abrupt halt. In seconds we were out of the truck with the doors flying. The lizard got wind of our approach and headed for the trailside, but Ryan cut him off and we were able to round him up. I immediately began calling the other members and spreading the word that in the final fleeting moments of our journey afield, we had tasted sweet success!

A short time later and the rest of the gang arrived. Cameras flashed, and measurements and data were taken, and the little lizard sat still enough, basking in his fifteen minutes of fame. It was a marvelous specimen, with sulfur yellow scattered generously across both its back and stomach. Eventually we released it back onto the flats on the hilltop of Blue Mountain Peak, where it scurried out across the ground for a short distance before stopping to survey us from what it deemed to be a safer vantage point. As for us, the time had finally drawn nigh, and we gave the little horned lizard a parting farewell as we headed back down the trail to make our departure. It had been a wonderful, if brief taste of the Texas hill country, and like most places I have scoured and combed in search of my beloved reptiles and amphibians, one I hope to return to in the future.

Horned Lizard Painting on Stone



This beautiful lizard was painted by Bryan Carter. It is painted on the Texas state stone which is petrified palmwood (it is really a fossil and the wood has been replaced by silica to make the stone). It is from East Texas and may be anywhere from 23 to 100 million years old which would place it as old as Early Cretaceous time when dinosaurs roamed the earth. The stone is 13 by 11½ inches and the lizard is 9 inches. Thank you, Bryan for sharing with us!

Member Highlight—The Toad Blog

By Perry Hudson

A greeting to everyone, my name is Perry Hudson. I am very excited to join the HLCS family and look forward to contributing in any way that I can. My wife and I first learned about the Horned Lizard Conservation Society by attending their booth at the TPWD Expo. We always discussed becoming members and finally made the decision to join in 2012. One benefit of membership was the opportunity to participate in yearly Horned Lizard Hunts and this was something that was very exciting.

Like so many people I have talked with through my life, I can remember horned lizards being everywhere. I can remember chasing them around our family cemetery when we visited. There had to be hundreds and they were so fast. Who would ever have imagined that they would be so very rare in the state of Texas where they are held with such respect?

I have loved reptiles and amphibians as long as I can remember. I have never had a fear of them although I have always had a respect for them. A family that did not hold them in such regards and would go out of their way to help them pass on to meet their maker raised me. I believed this to be such a sad view of such a complex and sophisticated animal that I realized I would always be an advocate if not an educator.

When I was offered an opportunity, I joined the Dallas Zoo's Docent Program in their reptile department. This gave me the opportunity to gain so much more knowledge on all of the species of lizards, snakes, toads, salamanders, crocodilians, turtles, tortoises and yes – Tuatara's. I was ravenous at the opportunity to work behind the scenes to see that zoos offer so much more than just glass windows to look at a King Cobra. Zoos specialize in specific breeding programs for endangered species that are key. Reptile departments work diligently on anti-venom programs of some of the most toxic venoms to help mankind for when we have the mishap of crossing paths with our "cold blooded" kindred. Most importantly, zoos offer education programs to the public that teaches respect but tolerance.

As a docent, my favorite opportunities were when I was teaching children and their parents. To see the wide eyes of a child as they touch a snake and find out they are not slimy. To help an adult try to overcome a fear that they have had their entire life that literally could cause them to have a heart attack. After leaving the zoo, I was able to build on this knowledge and my presentation skills to take my love of reptiles to the Boys Scouts of America and teach the Reptile and Amphibian merit badge. This is something I still love to do to this day.

I feel that my role is changing now, and I hope that this blog will assist me in furthering education to the public. I also will use this blog take stands on actions I feel are wrong and to ask people to act on political issues I feel are in he best interest of reptiles. I will use the format to let people know of new exhibits throughout the state and nation, not only for our dearly loved horned toad but other exhibits I feel are worth going to see while not exploiting the animals. Look for these blogs on the website and the newsletters.



Horned Lizard Survey Near Big Bend National Park May 23 - 26, 2014

By Tanya Phillips

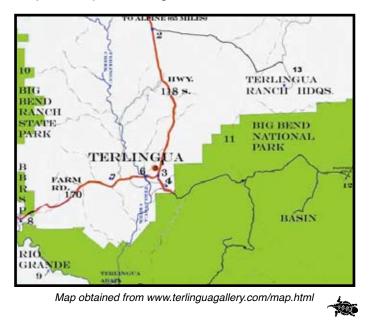
We are inviting horned lizard fans back to Tres Agaves Ranch north of Terlingua, Texas. Lodging available in generally shared space with 3 breakfast and 3 dinners included for \$60 for the entire weekend. (Fri night-Sun morning, just bring snacks, extra drinks, lunches and a pillow) or you can research lodging in Terlingua or Study Butte if you want private lodging. You may also bring your own tent for remote camping on our private land. (no hookups)

Please reserve your spot with us, as space is limited. Our home runs on solar energy ONLY and rain water collection with composting toilets. Cell service is good at my cabin, altitude is 4000 feet. Data via your cell phone will be spotty. They do have free wifi at Terlingua lodge. (5 miles away). The restaurant at lodge was closed for a bit, so if you stay there, call first to see if it's open.

We have seen Round Tail Horned Lizards on our

property in the past years. To see photos of our property – www.tresagavesranch.com

Contact us for reservations, details on what to bring, directions, or where else to find lodging. Tanya – tanya@tresagavesranch.com.



President's Message

Horned Toad Season Again

It seemed to be an especially rough winter this year. I am glad it's over and warm once again. It's time to get out and hit the nature festival circuit. We have already manned booths at several festivals.

There is a new one coming this fall. We have been invited to the BAM music festival fundraiser in Blanco, TX to benefit the Panther marching band of the Blanco high school, so that they can buy a band trailer for their equipment. The event will be held on August 9, 2014. The HLCS has been invited because the horned lizard is the mascot of this festival!

We will be back at the Old Rip Festival in Eastland, TX October 4th.If anyone can help with either of these fun events, please get in touch with me. <b.brooks@utexas.edu>

If you know of other festivals we can be a part of, please let me know. We need to spread our horned lizard conservation message far and wide. We can provide all booth sitters with handouts.

The survey at the Terlingua Ranch in far west Texas will be held at Tanya and Chuck's scenic vacation home. We are going out to the lovely Big Bend region again on May 23-26 (Memorial Day Weekend). Last time we had a delightful trip and found round-tail horned lizards and lots of wildlife. Please get your food money to Tanya soon and email her for more details. <tanya@tresagavesranch.com.>

Let's all get out and enjoy the weather while we can. Before we know it, it will be winter again. -Bill



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