



Center for Biological Diversity wants Texas horned lizard declared an endangered species in Oklahoma

The Center for Biological Diversity along with concerned scientists and citizens in Oklahoma have petitioned the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation to declare the Texas horned lizard an endangered species in the state.

by Ed Godfrey
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“We are asking for state protection as an endangered species, and that is why we went to the state agency,” said Collette Adkins Giese, a biologist and lawyer for the Center for Biological Diversity, which is headquartered in Tucson, Ariz.

“In the future, we may consider seeking federal Endangered Species Act protection with a petition to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.”

Texas horned lizards, or horny toads, were once common throughout Oklahoma, but have now nearly disappeared due to habitat destruction, pesticides and introduced fire ants, according to the petitioners.

The lizard is already listed as a “threatened species” in Texas. In both Oklahoma and Texas it is illegal to kill the lizards or collect them as pets.



HORNED FROG / HORNY TOAD / HORNED TOAD: Oklahoma City Zoo herpetology curator Stacey Sekscienski holds a Texas horned lizard with a transmitter attached to his back so wildlife experts can locate and study them on Tinker Air Force Base, May 27, 2009. Photo by Steve Gooch, The Oklahoman ORG XMIT: KOD

“Time’s running out for these lizards,” Giese said, a lawyer focused on protecting reptiles and amphibians. “The state of Oklahoma needs to recognize the dire situation these rare creatures are in before it’s too late.”

The Texas horned lizard has undergone massive declines in Oklahoma and continues to be threatened by loss of habitat and many other factors, she said.

The Center for Biological Diversity is joined in its petition by Dr. Steve Sheffield, a zoologist who received his Ph.D. from Oklahoma State University; Dr. Geoffrey Carpenter, a herpetologist affiliated with the University of Oklahoma Biological Station; and Kade Wilson, 15, of Moore.

Wilson contacted the center for help in protecting the lizards after learning that a shopping center would be built in a field near his home, where he enjoyed finding the lizards.

“I might not be a scientist or a biologist but I know that the horny toad is just trying to share the Earth with us, and we’re taking it away from them,” Wilson said. “Horny toads look like modern dinosaurs, and that’s why they’re interesting to me. If we don’t protect them, the horny toads too will be gone.”

Experts agree that the Texas horned lizard is suffering substantial declines not just in Oklahoma, but across its range in the Midwest and Southwest.

Because the lizard eats harvester ants and not much else, pesticides that kill its ant prey also harm the lizard. Other threats include invasive red fire ants (that outcompete the native harvesters), drought from climate change, and illegal collection for the pet trade.

“It’s so sad that horned lizards are declining. These beautiful creatures are iconic members of desert and prairie communities of the western United States,” said Carpenter, a herpetologist and co-author of the petition. “We need to protect the lizard and its habitat while we still can.”

The Texas horned lizard has prominent horns on its head and spines scattered over its backs and sides.

To avoid being eaten by predators, the normally flat-bodied lizard can puff up and appear very fat, causing its body scales to protrude so the lizard cannot be easily swallowed. The lizard also ejects blood from its eyes when threatened.

Although reptiles have been around for hundreds of millions of years and survived all past mass extinction events, now, due largely to human impacts, they’re dying off at up to 10,000 times the historic extinction rate, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

About 20 percent of reptiles in the world are endangered or vulnerable to extinction, according to the center.