

## Restoring the Horned Lizard Back to Central Texas.

It wasn't long ago when I wrote about animals I remember from my youth that I miss seeing now, and the "Horney toad" was on the top of my list. Well, it turns out that there are a number of folks in different parts of the state that are working very hard to bring the critter back to central Texas. This work was recently described in an article in Texas Parks and Wildlife Magazine, by Editor Louie Bond, and it is a fascinating story.

There are several species or sub-species of the chubby little critters, and the ones in the Panhandle, far West Texas, and South Texas seem to be doing OK, but those in the rest of the state, not so much.

Why the decline in their numbers? Mainly loss of habitat due to conversion of rangeland to farmland, reductions in their main food source, (harvester ants) due to competition from fire ants, introduction of exotic grasses changing the nature of the open space between native bunchgrasses, and introduced predators (dogs, cats and hogs).

This past September, 140 2-week old lizards that had been raised at the Fort Worth and Dallas Zoos were released onto Mason Mountain Wildlife Management Area. But reintroducing a species even into its ideal habitat is a process that can be very complicated and expensive and many times is unsuccessful. The process which led to the above release actually began 10 years ago when a group of scientists gathered to discuss what they could do for the threatened critters.

There was no place where the same central Texas species that has become rare in most of the state is so heavily populated in other areas, that it might be possible to transplant them from one area to another. That left only one possibility: to raise large numbers of the lizard in the laboratory and release them.

But before you can do that, you have to learn the details about the life cycles of the species so you can mimic natural conditions in the laboratory. And then you have to have a "starter" population of lizards, caught in the wild, that lay eggs that can be incubated and grown in the lab.

They were lucky in that respect. For instance, one wild-caught mother laid 33 eggs—28 of them hatched and all survived to adulthood—a really incredible event. In the wild, the vast majority of hatchlings are taken by predators before they reach adulthood.

By this process the labs raised enough lizards to begin producing large enough populations of young adults to release, as was done at Mason Mountain.

But it is not that simple. You have to feed all those hungry mouths, and they don't have "horned lizard" chow at the feed store. As an example, a couple of dozen lizards consumed 3,000 harvester ants, 40,000 crickets plus roaches and mealworms in a week!. Buying and/or raising than many of the insects can be very expensive.

When one lab reaches its projected population of lizard babies to feed, the expected food bill is between \$800 and \$1000 per month!

Releasing declined species back into the wild is a risky business, especially for prey species that have lots of predators, and nearly everything eats horned lizards. Work with captive-raised quail has taught us that for these releases to be successful, you have to release many more individuals than you might think in order to establish a surviving viable wild population. The horned lizard folks are hoping to do just that.

But there is one more little problem. You need to be able to monitor the populations after release for at least a year. And it turns out that while the little round critters are easy to catch, they are harder to find than you might think. The researches have found that even young college-age eyes miss the majority of lizards when searching a natural area. So now there is an attempt to train dogs to find them during census times.

You will be glad to know that the majority of the costs for all of these projects are funded by private donations. If you want to contribute, here are the addresses: [sazoo.org/about/donate/texashornedlizard](http://sazoo.org/about/donate/texashornedlizard), or [www.fortworthzoo.org/donate-now](http://www.fortworthzoo.org/donate-now).

By the way, I have a "Horney Toad" on my license plate. Doing that didn't help this project any, but it does help Texas Parks and Wildlife generally.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Ecology," "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners." He can be reached at [jstmn@ktc.com](mailto:jstmn@ktc.com). Previous columns can be seen at [www.hillcountrynaturalist.org](http://www.hillcountrynaturalist.org).