

Short-Horned Lizard

Tips From the Posse
By Mark Rackay

Growing up in the west, I don't recall seeing any lizards. Admittedly, I don't look down much when I am outside as I am too busy looking around for game and just about everything else.

Perhaps it is my attention span, or lack thereof. My grandmother always said I have the attention span of a monkey chewing on a fly swatter. I have been in areas that are supposedly rich environments for arrowheads, yet I have never found an arrowhead in my life. I take other people, and they always find them. I guess I look around for a few minutes, not see any arrowheads, or lizards for that matter, and move onto other things.

However, over the last 10 or 15 years, I have seen many lizards around the Western Slope. The photo accompanying this article is of the only greater short-horned lizard I have ever seen. He was quite cooperative, allowing me to study him and enjoy what a fascinating little creature he is.

The greater short-horned lizard goes by the street name *Phrynosoma hernandesi*, because I knew you were going to ask. He is widely distributed from southern Alberta, to Mexico, east to portions of Nebraska, and west to portions of Oregon. In Colorado, he inhabits much of the eastern plains and the entire western slope.

The *hernandesi* in his name is in honor of a Spanish physician named Francisco Hernandez. Dr. Hernandez wrote an early account of a horned lizard, which was published in 1615.



This is the only short horned lizard I have ever seen. He didn't mind the photo shoot. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

Many people wrongly call him a "horny toad," but these animals are actually lizards which is a type of reptile. Toads, on the other hand, are an amphibian.

Old short-horned loves the dry and arid short grass prairie, sagebrush flats, and the open country with junipers and pinyon. He prefers to stay below 8500 feet but has been reported as high as 11,000 feet in altitude.

One of the reasons he is not often spotted is his size, measuring a tad over 3 inches long when full grown. A full-grown male will weigh in at 5.5 grams, the weight of a quarter. A yearling weighs the same as a dime. His colorations vary with the soil conditions and colors where he lives. He blends in perfectly. No stripe down the middle, and rough looking enlarged scales down

his back. He looks like a miniature dinosaur.

The short-horned lizard does have spines on his head, short and separated in the middle back of his head, by a gap. His tail is flattened and rough looking, with cross-sections. If you study him closely, he appears to have mini- spines on his sides and protruding scales on his legs. He is an amazing looking little guy, but he will not bring home the trophy in a beauty contest.

His favorite meal is ants, but occasionally he will chow down on other insects and spiders. They don't stalk their prey but stand hunt, patiently waiting and striking when the prey comes stumbling by too closely.

They do have short teeth and a small lower mandible. Horned lizards usually capture their prey with their sticky tongue rather than grabbing it with their mouth.

Short-horned lizards are fairly cold tolerant, and because of the higher elevations they live at, have a shorter breeding season. They generally breed in the spring and give birth in August or September.

Other species of horned lizards lay eggs, but short-horned are the only species to give birth to the young live. The eggs are retained within the mother until the live young are born, giving birth to around 7 to 10 at a time, but sometimes as many as 16.

When the babies are born, they are only about an inch long. The mother does not have much of a nurturing instinct, as the babies are left on their own right after birth.

Horned lizards are pretty far down the food chain. Their enemies include coyote,

hawks, snakes, and their worst enemy, people. People wrongly take them home for pets, and that is a death sentence to them. They require specialized care, and in some places, like Texas, they are illegal to possess.

Left in the wild, he can reach up to 8 years old, best to leave him be.

When threatened, a horned lizard will flatten itself out and use its natural camouflage to try and remain undetected. If that doesn't work, he can inflate himself to almost twice his normal size to appear menacing to his adversary. As a last resort, he has a nuclear option and can actually squirt blood from his eyes at his enemy.

The greater short horned lizard is classified as a non-game species in Colorado by Colorado Parks and Wildlife. In the United States, he is doing pretty well but endangered in Canada. Officially he is listed as IUCN Red List least concern species.

I need to pay closer attention to the ground level when I walk. I just might one day find an arrowhead, but more likely, see another one of these horned lizards. They are a fascinating critter to see.

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CSU launches public tool for tracking forest management and wildfire mitigation

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

The Colorado State Forest Service and the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, both part of Colorado State University, have compiled data and designed a new dashboard to make information about forest management available to the public. The Colorado Forest Tracker will inform strategies for improving forest health and reducing wildfire risk, and policymakers can use it to help guide funding decisions to best meet state needs.

The tracker is a new central database and reporting system that records completed forest management activities throughout Colorado.

This new tool is the first of its kind in Colorado, delivering comprehensive information about forest management accomplishments to policymakers, foresters, land managers, firefighters, researchers and all Coloradans in one location.

"The Colorado Forest Tracker is a key tool to inform Coloradans where vital investments have been made to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health on all land ownerships in Colorado," said Dan Gibbs, executive director of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources. "This unique resource gives state and federal land managers as well as local forest collaboratives and municipalities a broad view of the completed forest health and wildfire reduction projects from a large landscape to a local community scale. They can then ensure we have the right resources going to the right projects to protect life, property and critical infrastructure."

The Colorado Forest Tracker includes data across federal, state, local and private lands. Access to this data across different land ownership types on one map is a new opportunity that can improve strategic planning.

"Seeing what activities have been completed will help practitioners make better use of funds by strategically planning future activities that capitalize on the work that's

already been accomplished," said Amanda West Fordham, associate director of science and data at the CSFS. "It also provides an invaluable tool to wildland firefighting as incident management teams seek historical fuel treatment data for active wildfire management."

Tracked activities include management techniques that alter forest vegetation, such as cutting trees and bushes, prescribed fire and reforestation. This provides a transparent picture of where and how Coloradans are working to maintain and improve forest ecosystems for ecological, economic and social benefits, while also supporting wildfire risk reduction goals.

Data available in this initial release of the Colorado Forest Tracker spans 2000-2023. Highlights include:

- More than 25,000 different forest management activities across 1.1 million acres.
- Forestry activities recorded in 51 of Colorado's 64 counties.
- 538,428 total acres of prescribed fire activities in Colorado.
- Tree planting on more than 45,000 acres to accelerate reforestation.

CSFS and CFRI scientists compiled the data from publicly available databases as well as voluntary submissions from land managers across Colorado. Land managers are strongly encouraged to submit data and add to the value of the

open-access resource.

"Forest management data is decentralized and not collected in the same way across agencies or land ownerships. This has made it really challenging to learn what's working best or what investments in our forests are making a difference across the state," said Brett Wolk, associate director of the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute. "Putting all the forest management activities apples to apples on one map has been a missing puzzle piece. I hope the tracker opens doors to better understand what's working to help keep the forests we all love and depend on for clean air, water and quality of life resilient into the future."



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