

Don't tread on me. I am the color of the earth and I hold the world; therefore, walk carefully, that you do not tread on me.

— Words used by native people with respect to horned lizards.



Horned lizards are well known by the people of the desert southwest. Many residents may have fond memories of finding these docile lizards around their homes. Unfortunately, horned lizards are not as common or widespread as they were 30 or 40 years ago. Finding out why and reversing this trend is part of a cooperative research effort between numerous federal and state government agencies.



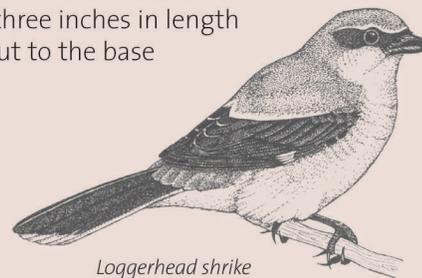
Flat-tailed horned lizard hatchling below.



What is a Flat-tailed Horned Lizard?

The flat-tailed horned lizard, *Phrynosoma mcallii*, is also nicknamed 'horny toad.' Phrynos is the derivative of toad, and soma means body. The flat-tailed horned lizard is not an amphibian like the toad, it is a reptile. All reptiles depend primarily on their environment to control their body temperature, and flat-tailed horned lizards like it hot. They are often seen basking in the sun. Susceptible to overheating, they move into shade or enter into burrows when summer days get very hot. In the cool temperatures of winter, flat-tails are inactive and less likely to be encountered on the ground surface.

Flat-tailed horned lizards have many characteristics that distinguish them from other lizards. Most obvious is their body shape. Instead of the sleek, tubular body shape of most lizards, flat-tails have a wide, flattened body suitable for camouflage and burrowing. All horned lizards are noticeably spiny, with a crown of horns adorning the back of their heads. Flat-tails have six temporal horns, which are longer than those of other lizards. Flat-tailed horned lizards also differ from others by a flatter tail, and a dark stripe running down the back. Adult flat-tails measure slightly over three inches in length from the snout to the base of the tail.

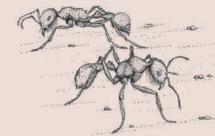


Loggerhead shrike

Predator and Prey

All horned lizards prefer to eat ants, but flat-tails specialize on harvester ants which make up 90% of their diet. Unpalatable to most animals, these black ants have powerful toxins. Flat-tails will eat 150–200 harvester ants a day. Usually they search for prey in open areas, quietly waiting for an unsuspecting ant to come into view, sometimes letting them crawl all over their bodies. When an ant passes by, it is quickly snapped up with a flick of the flat-tail's tongue and swallowed whole.

Predators of the flat-tailed horned lizard include kit foxes, ground squirrels, coachwhips, leopard lizards, burrowing owls and other birds, such as ravens and shrikes. Loggerhead shrikes impale lizards on any sharp object for later consumption, as well as to attract a mate.



The flat-tailed horned lizard typically inhabits creosote bush plant communities with sandy substrate.

Desert Camouflage Artist

Flat-tailed horned lizards may attempt to avoid predators by using various tactics. They may hiss or jump when harassed, or use their long, sharp horns. However, somewhat of a desert camouflage artist, flat-tails most effectively avoid predators by simply holding still. Their color patterns closely match the soil on which they live and they eliminate their shadows by flattening against the ground. If forced to move, it runs only a short distance, stopping unexpectedly. The lizard then lays flat, blends into its surroundings and the predator is left confused. Flat-tailed horned lizards are so well camouflaged that humans must be careful not to step on or run over them.



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Text adapted from The Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Brochure written by Erik Hollenbeck.