

FLAT TAIL HORNED LIZARD

The ecoregion of the Gran Desierto de Altar and the Upper Gulf of California has the most extensive active and stable sand dunes on the continent. Its marine, coastal and deltaic zones are the most productive in the country and the geological region of the Pinacate has vast lava flows and ten large Maar craters.

The creosote and white bursage plant association is representative of the great sand flats; the saguaro together with the cholla and palo verde create spectacular vistas, and then the ocotillo and galleta grass abound in the region of the dunes.

These plant communities provide food and cover for the sonoran pronghorn antelope, big horn sheep and many small mammals, not to mention the birds and innumerable reptiles, some of which are dangerous, such as the rattlesnake, or very docile, like the chameleon of the Gran Desierto – the flat tail horned lizard.

The fauna of the region also includes endemic species or marine mammals and fish, such as the vaquita or Gulf of California harbor porpoise and the Totoaba.

In the Gran Desierto de Altar are two major areas protected by Mexican law: El Pinacate y Gran Desierto de Altar Biosphere Reserve and the Alto Golfo de California and Delta del Rio Colorado Biosphere Reserve.

Both Reserves and the Intercultural Center for the Study of Deserts and Oceans, Inc. (CEDO) are participating in a bi-national (Mexico and the US) conservation project to protect the populations of the “Chameleon del Gran Desierto” or flat tail horned lizard (*Phrynosoma mcallii*).

What is the Flat Tail Horned Lizard

The flat tail horned lizard or horned toad is not actually a toad. It is a species of lizard characterized by its light brown color, similar to the color of the sand, with a flattened body and tail, two large protuberances or horns over its head, and sporting a visible black line over its back, along the vertebral column. These characteristics distinguish this animal from other reptiles or lizards such as the desert iguana, which usually have a round or cylindrical body shape.

Its primary habitat is the sand flats of the Gran Desierto de Altar, where the vegetation is scarce and along the border with the U.S.

Like all lizards, being cold blooded animals, they like sunny and warm days.

Help us Conserve this animal.

Today the main threats to survival of this animal in the Gran Desierto de Altar are:

Plant removal: elimination of the plants that provide protection.

Pesticides: these chemicals can cause indirect poisoning when the lizard feeds on ants.

Urbanization: these activities reduce and destroy habitat through the production of trash and other waste products of human developments.

Mining and Extraction: this activity, like urbanization, reduces and spoils the habitat by contaminated the soil with acids, oil and heavy metals.

All Terrain Vehicles: flat tail horned lizards in the Gran Desierto are frequently run over when dune buggies, four wheel drive pick ups, SUVs and dirt bikes intrude on the sand flats. The animals protective coloration and their habit of staying motionless when threatened makes them difficult to observe and very vulnerable to these types of vehicles.

Opening of trails and roads: this activity encourages the use of all terrain vehicles and breaks up the animals habitat, isolating populations and subjecting them to possible local extinction.

How can you help?

When you visit the Biosphere Reserves, obey the posted rules for visitors.

Don't use all terrain vehicles in the dunes or sand flats.

Don't throw trash – this can increase the population of crows which prey on the flat tail horned lizard.

Don't introduce chemicals such as pesticides.

Don't capture or keep the lizard as pets: their food requirements don't allow them to do well in captivity.

Don't drive off the established roads.

Camp only in the designated camp sites within the Reserves.

Report any infraction of these rules and suggestions to the Reserve personnel.

Share these recommendations with your friends, fellow travelers and other visitors who may be unaware of them.