

Images from the Camp





## Yellow-crowned Night Heron, *Nyctanassa violacea*

Article and photos — Joanne Fellows

**T**he **Yellow-crowned Night Heron** is a solitary and secretive bird. What a surprise to find this heron fishing in the retention pond after the last rain. It was early morning, but this one circled the pond in the open. They are known as crab eaters, but are also fond of crayfish. The retention pond has plenty of these mud dwellers. It swallows its prey whole and has stomach acid capable of dissolving shell.



Their red iris gives them a fierce look with the dramatic striping on their head. Their plumage really does a wonderful job of making them disappear as soon as they get near vegetation.

## What Happened to our Horny Toads?

Growing up in the country in the Permian Basin of the High Plains of Texas, I have many fond memories of finding horny toads and box turtles and of listening to quail calls and the sounds of pump jacks. But after leaving Texas to finish my graduate education, I did not spend much time in the Texas countryside until we moved back here 35 years later.

After we had lived here a while I noticed I wasn't seeing any horny toads or box turtles and very few quail. For that matter, I wasn't seeing hardly any rattlesnakes either.

At a recent monthly meeting of the Hill Country Master Naturalists (all of which are free and open to the public), retired Texas Parks and Wildlife biologist Lee Ann Linam talked about the plight of horned lizards in Texas.

It turns out that since they are in fact not toads, but lizards, the proper name is "horned lizards". There are three species in Texas, the most common, Texas Horned Lizard, which used to range over almost all of Texas, except for the piney woods, the Roundtailed Horned Lizard, a less common species found in the western half of the state, and the Greater Short-horned Lizard found only in the Davis and Guadalupe mountains.

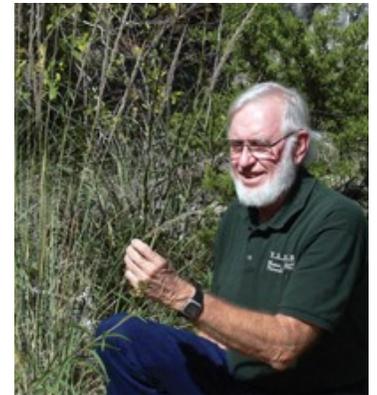
There is no question that the numbers of horned lizards in Texas are very much smaller than they used to be and that the decline in numbers started in either the late sixties or early seventies. The burning question that everyone wants answered, of course, is what caused the decline of our horny toads and can we bring them back? There is no single, simple answer to either question.

Among the causes believed to have contributed at least somewhat to the decline in horny toad numbers are:

- Loss of habitat due to increased amounts of cultivated farm land and "improved" grass (bermudagrass, buffelgrass) pasture acreage (probably the biggest contributor to the decline).
- Increased human population, and the accompanying land "development" and land fragmentation.
- Loss of red harvester ants, a preferred food, due to a combination of increasing fire ant populations and increasing use of pesticides.



Red harvester ant, Cynthia Ross—Pinterest



Jim Stanley

wildlifenorthernamerica.com



- Over-collection for the pet trade.
- Feral cat predation.

Horned lizards main food is red harvester ants and their preferred habitat is relatively open areas with some bare ground, preferably with loose soil, but areas with enough grass and forb seeds to sustain high populations of harvester ants. The lizards like to station themselves along the harvester ant trails and pick off individual ants as they go out foraging. Fire ants don't have such well-defined foraging trails, and if they found a horned lizard, they would attack it in mass.



Interestingly, the decline in our quail populations have somewhat coincided with the decline in horned lizard populations and there is a lot of similarity in preferred habitat between the two species and a lot of similarity in the list of contributory causes for their decline.

The study of the decline of the box turtle is just beginning and we don't know as much about them. When I was a kid I collected box turtles and at one time had several in a large pen with alfalfa that my father had used to raise pheasants. I even had one lay eggs and found several hatchlings. I have not seen a box turtle in the Hill Country in the past 14 years

Not surprisingly, when any species undergoes a precipitous decline in a relatively short period of time, the cause almost always has to do with the human population and the tremendous effects we have had on the environment and native habitats in the past few decades. In addition to the horned lizards, box turtles, and quail we can add goldencheeked warblers, black-capped vireos, prairie chickens, whooping cranes, and prairie dogs to the list of declining species in Texas.

We have left a huge footprint on the land in the past century or so. We humans can change the habitat for wildlife faster than the wildlife can adapt to the change. Some wildlife have learned to cope or even thrive in our midst, others have not been so lucky. Which species will be next? Have we had our "canary in the coal mine" warning about our environment yet? If not, when?

Until next time...

**Jim Stanley** is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spiling It". He can be reached at [jstmn@kctc.com](mailto:jstmn@kctc.com). Previous columns can be seen at [www.hillcountrynaturalist.org](http://www.hillcountrynaturalist.org).



Texas Horned Lizard — Seth Patterson on Flickr

*From Shari Brand*

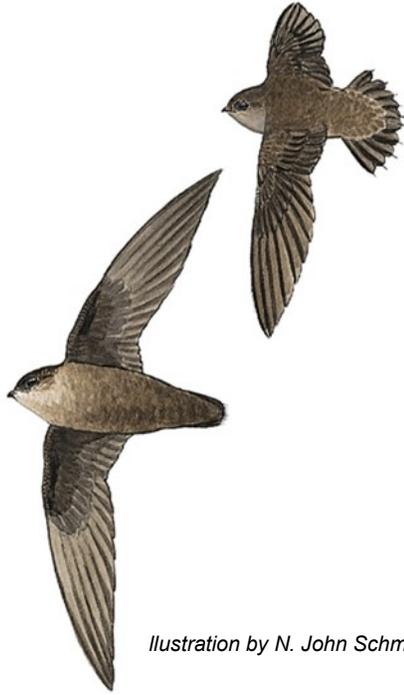
**T**his summer, I found 3 monarch caterpillars grazing on some milkweed growing in pots in my yard. Not wanting to sacrifice them to the birds, I put a tomato cage over the pots and covered the cages with tulle (netting) to protect them. After a few days, one made a chrysalis hanging from the top of the tomato cage. The second escaped the pot and made a chrysalis hanging from the top of a window. The third one disappeared.

**B**oth monarchs hatched this morning, and the one hanging from the window flew away just as I came outdoors to check on them. We took photos of the one in the tomato cage, then took the tulle off and set it free. It was an amazing experience. A little later, my husband found another monarch on the patio with a curled up wing. Since the other two flew off easily, perhaps this is the third one we couldn't find. Searching online, most advice for the curled wing is not to interfere. Unfortunately, some monarch chrysalises become infected with protozoans and emerge with curled wings. There isn't anything one can do.



## Where's the excitement?

**Try Fritz Poppie!** Recently, he heard the sound of Chimney Swifts and he was indeed excited because he didn't have any last year. Below is a bit of information from "All About Birds".



*Illustration by N. John Schmitt*

**Chimney Swifts** spend their lives airborne, except when they are roosting or on the nest. They perform aerial courtship displays within 2 weeks of arriving on their North American breeding grounds, forming monogamous pairs for the season. In one of the best known displays, two birds fly close together, calling; first the rear bird and then the leader snaps its wings into a V-shape and the two glide together in a downward curve. Unmated birds roost together in large flocks, sometimes even in a chimney occupied by a nesting pair. Often an unmated helper may assist a breeding pair with rearing the young. After the young fledge, small groups of parents and young from several chimneys join larger staging flocks in bigger chimneys nearby. At the end of summer they gather into large groups to migrate to South America.

During migration, as many as 10,000 swifts may circle in a tornado-like flock at dusk and funnel into a roosting chimney to spend the night. The lives of these widespread urban birds are surprisingly unstudied, because of their inaccessible nesting and roosting sites and their aerial lifestyle.

[http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Chimney\\_Swift/lifehistory](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Chimney_Swift/lifehistory)

**"If** I were to name the three most precious resources of life, I should say books, friends, and nature; and the greatest of these, at least the most constant and always at hand, is nature."

From John Burroughs quotes



John Burroughs was an American naturalist and nature essayist, active in the U.S. conservation movement. The first of his essay collections was *Wake-Robin* in 1871. In the words of his biographer Edward Rhenan, Burroughs' special identity was less that of a scientific naturalist than that of "a literary naturalist with a duty to record his own unique perceptions of the natural world." The result was a body of work whose resonance with the tone of its cultural moment explains both its popularity at that time, and its relative obscurity since.