

NEWSBRIEFS

Flat-tailed Horned Lizard Gets Another Chance

A lizard known for its dinosaur-like features is back in line for endangered species protection, according to backers of the tiny, desert reptile. A federal judge in Arizona on 13 September ruled that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service erred when it dropped the Flat-tailed Horned Lizard (*Phrynosoma mcallii*) from consideration as a “threatened” species eligible for special legal protection. In a 15-page ruling, District Court Judge Neil Wake said the government “violated the Endangered Species Act” by failing to evaluate the impact of habitat loss on the species when it withdrew a proposal to list it as threatened.



WENDY HODGES

The ruling means that the Flat-tailed Horned Lizard will once again be considered for threatened species status. Environmentalists say that could help the reptiles recover from building and other pressures that have pushed it from developed areas like much of the Coachella Valley.

Federal wildlife officials say they don't yet know the ramifications of the decision. “Without a listing it really just gets lip service,” said Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist for the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the environmental groups behind the legal challenge. “You can't just go out and plow lizard habitat into the ground,” Patterson said.

However, if the lizard were to gain the special status, it could mean costly new building requirements in its habitat, including places like the Coachella Valley. Listing opponents say the lizard litigation battle is more about thwarting development than preserving reptiles. Earlier decisions by the Fish and Wildlife Service to withdraw threatened species consideration for the Flat-tailed Horned Lizard were based on sound science, said Ed Kibbey, spokesman for the desert chapter of the Building Industry Association.

If the lizard were to get added protection it could mean builders would have to compensate the government in exchange for disturbing lizard habitat, Kibbey said. That could mean anything from setting aside land on a project site to buying land for the lizard elsewhere, he said.



ARIZONA-SONORA DESERT MUSEUM (TWO-COLUMN)

The protected status of Flat-tailed Horned Lizards (*Phrynosoma mcallii*) has been the subject of intense legal and bureaucratic battles dating back to 1982.

The Flat-tailed Horned Lizard has already been driven from much of its local habitat, said Allan Muth, director of the Palm Desert-based Boyd Deep Canyon Research Center, a University of California, Riverside desert wildlife research center. He said it once roamed around Snow Creek and other sandy areas, but is now limited to the Coachella Valley Preserve, a refuge in Thousand Palms. “They can't survive in developed areas,” he said. “Too many kids, cats, dogs, traffic, all those things.”

The lizard has been the subject of intense legal and bureaucratic battles dating back to 1982. In 1997, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service withdrew a proposal to list the Flat-tailed Horned Lizard. In 2001, a federal judge ordered the service to reconsider. The lizard was again proposed for listing, but in January wildlife officials withdrew it once more. “This species has been the subject of a fair amount of litigation over the years,” said Jane Hendron, a spokeswoman for the Carlsbad office of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

A proposed local plan to balance economic growth with protecting the environment was designed to ensure the Flat-tailed Horned Lizard sufficient habitat to survive in the Coachella Valley, even without federal listing — but the Coachella Valley Multi-Species Plan is not yet in place, and some lizard supporters say the government's threatened species tag would give momentum to ongoing preservation efforts.

Wake's ruling Tuesday drew praise from the environmentalists, but it didn't outline what the government would need to do to comply. The judge scheduled a conference between the opposing groups.

Benjamin Spillman
The Desert Sun

Proposed Regulations In PA: Bad News For Rattlesnake

Roundups, Good News For Herps

No two states handle wildlife management the same way — especially reptiles and amphibians. Even after the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC) reluctantly took charge of these animals in 1980, the state's 76 reptilian and amphibian species and subspecies

remained an unwanted burden and were continually tossed back and forth between PFBC and the Pennsylvania Game Commission. Whereas most fish and wildlife create millions of dollars of state revenue through hunting and fishing licenses, reptiles and amphibians are not so lucrative. Neither agency has ever wanted to deal with them, so they have remained largely unregulated in Pennsylvania — until recently.

Pennsylvania is one of seven states where Rattlesnake Roundups are still legal (others are Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Kansas, Alabama, and Georgia). Pennsylvania is home to no less than nine or ten roundups per year, despite the fact that the state's rattlesnakes are a candidate-threatened species (Timber Rattlesnake, *Crotalus horridus*) and an endangered species (Eastern Massassauga, *Sistrurus c. catenatus*).

Unlike the relatively resilient Western Diamondback collected for most Southwestern roundups, the candidate-threatened Timber Rattlesnake is quite



SUZANNE L. COLLINS, CMAH

New regulations in Pennsylvania will provide protection for Northern Copperheads (*Agkistrodon contortrix mokasen*, top) by requiring permits for their harvest, and for threatened Timber Rattlesnakes (*Crotalus horridus*, middle) and endangered Eastern Massassaugas (*Sistrurus c. catenatus*, bottom) by implementing restrictive rules on participants in the state's rattlesnake roundups.

vulnerable. Adults only reach sexual maturity after 8–10 years, and only reproduce once every 3–5 years. Research shows Timbers may abandon den sites that have been molested. Survival rates are well under 25% for snakes released outside of their small 1–2 mile home range. During roundups, dens are commonly disturbed or destroyed and snakes that aren't killed or kept often are released outside their home ranges. After decades of roundups, these actions have taken their toll. A several-year study by state biologists has shown 71% of Pennsylvania's South Mountain Timber Rattlesnake population has gone the way of the buffalo.

Currently wildlife advocates are working on a long-term project to completely do away with roundups. In the meantime, the PFBC has come up with a short-term solution involving new roundup regulations. To roundup organizers, these new regulations are a major roadblock. To wildlife advocates, these changes are a big step in the right direction.

Under current regulations, a \$5 permit allows roundup participants to take up to two Timber Rattlesnakes per year, regardless of sex or age. In fact, "heaviest rattlesnake" prizes are awarded at roundups, encouraging participants to seek out and capture gravid females from the wild. Under the proposed regulations, Timbers will receive much more protection. Hunt permits will cost \$50 instead of five, and participants will be allowed only one snake instead of two. Females will be completely off-limits, and males must be a minimum of 42 in (average adult length of a male Timber is 41 in). Although roundups will still be legal, they will be far less harmful to rattlesnake populations.

Pennsylvania also leads the union with more roads per square mile than any other state. Consequently, the state's amphibians and reptiles have really felt the sting of fragmentation and habitat loss. Other changes proposed in the new regulations aim to sustain many other declining populations. Northern Copperheads (*Agkistrodon contortrix mokasen*) will be given a closed season and collection-permit for the first time. A new permit system for Snapping Turtles (*Chelydra serpentina*) will monitor their collection much more closely. Snapping Turtle changes came after a sin-



SUZANNE L. COLLINS, CMAH

A new permit system in Pennsylvania will monitor the harvest of Common Snapping Turtles (*Chelydra serpentina*) much more closely than in the past.

gle Philadelphia meat vendor reportedly sold 12,000 pounds of Snapper meat per year. Additionally, every other species in the state is given extra protection with possession limits being dropped from two to one. Several species that have been negatively affected by collection from the wild (e.g., Eastern Box Turtle, *Terrapene carolina carolina*) will no longer be legal to collect at all.

Proposed regulations are being met with fierce opposition from Rattlesnake Roundup organizers, who make thousands of dollars from roundups. In order for the improved regulations to pass, wildlife advocates who support these changes must make their opinions known to PFBC. Proposed regulations are up for public comment from 15 October through 15 December. Comments concerning the proposed regulations can be e-mailed through PFBC's website (www.fish.state.pa.us). Copies of the new regulations are available at http://sites.state.pa.us/PA_Exec/Fish_Boat/rulemakings/175nprp.htm.

Jesse Rothacker
Forgotten Friend Reptile Sanctuary

Eastern Box Turtle Regional Conservation Workshop

28 September 2005

National Wildlife Center, Patuxent Research Center, Laurel, Maryland

This was the first ever workshop that concentrated on the Eastern Box Turtle (*Terrapene carolina carolina*). Its goal was not just to go over what we know, but what must be done. The issues and actions discussed do not just pertain to the Eastern Box Turtle but all North American box turtles.



Eastern Box Turtles (*Terrapene carolina carolina*) were the focus of a conservation workshop in Maryland and will benefit from new no-harvest regulations in Pennsylvania.

Presentations were given by Dr. Kenneth Dodd, author of *North American Box Turtles: A Natural History*, on challenges to conserving box turtles in the 21st Century. Dr. Richard Seigel spoke about the importance of population demography. A rather frightening report documented the discovery of an iridovirus that has been discovered in wild populations of box turtles and which has caused massive die offs.

Breakout sessions produced lists of suggestions concerning further research needs, the state and federal roles, education, the problem of repatriations and rehabilitation of box turtles, development threats, and more.

Plans already are in the works for developing a special working group on box turtles that meets every two years. (tentatively in North Carolina in fall of 2006).

Allen Salzberg
HerpDigest

Associated Press
27 October 2005



Caribbean Green Sea Turtles (*Chelonia mydas*), such as this young adult, may be vulnerable to a tumor-causing virus.

Illness Threatens Turtles in Puerto Rico

A population of endangered Green Sea Turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) is in danger of being wiped out on the Puerto Rican island of Culebra because of a tumor-causing illness, environmental officials said Thursday. Five of the tiny island's some 300 Green Sea Turtles have died from the tumors recently, and officials fear more could fall ill, said Carlos Diez, a biologist with Puerto Rico's Department of Natural Resources and Environment.

The tumors, believed to be caused by a form of the herpes virus, form internally and externally, obstructing the turtles' breathing, intestinal system, and vision, Diez said. "Eventually, (the virus) kills the animal, putting the species in danger," he told reporters. Diez said it was unclear how the turtles might have become infected with herpes, which is usually transmitted sexually among humans. Possible causes could be contamination in the ocean, changes in ocean water temperature, or problems with the turtles' immune systems. Authorities are conducting tests on the waters where the turtles live around Culebra, an island off eastern Puerto Rico, to check for contamination.

Besides Puerto Rico, Green Sea Turtles are found around the U.S. Virgin Islands, Florida, and throughout the North Pacific. The species received endangered status in 1978, although the current worldwide population size is not known. The biggest cause of the species' dwindling numbers is the commercial harvest of eggs for food, according to the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service.

Grand Cayman Blue Iguana Twins Hatch at Gladys Porter Zoo

On 22 August 2005, the Herpetarium crew at the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, Texas was elated to learn that the sole Grand Cayman Blue Iguana (*Cyclura lewisi*) egg that had been in their incubator for 76 days contained not one, but two, Grand Cayman Blue Iguanas. The twins were connected by the umbilical stalk, and both seemed quite vigorous. The stalk was tied off and the two lizards were separated and returned to the incubator.

After 15 days, one of the two began to eat and, by three weeks of age, both of them were eating well. They prefer various types of red flowers, including the pistils from Hibiscus flowers, which are cut into tiny bits with scissors.

Although the hatchlings weigh less than half the average for normal baby Blue Iguanas, based on data provided by Frederic J. Burton, Director of the Blue Iguana Recovery Program on Grand Cayman, their chances for survival are good.

The egg hatched from a clutch of eight laid on 7 June at the zoo. Three eggs appeared to be fertile at time of laying, but only one developed. Keepers noted that the egg did not retain the typical oval shape of a developing *Cyclura* egg. Midway through incubation, it was almost perfectly round.

This represents the first successful hatching of a Grand Cayman Blue Iguana at the Gladys Porter Zoo. The female that produced the offspring is of U.S. captive stock and, in previous years,

The West Indian Rock Iguanas of the genus *Cyclura* are, as a group, under severe threat throughout their range. As large island animals with no adaptations for dealing with mammalian predators and competitors, they are suffering catastrophic declines from dog, cat, and rat predation, hunting, habitat degradation by goats and cattle, and large-scale habitat loss to human activities. The Grand Cayman Blue Iguana is the most endangered in the group, with an estimated 10–25 individuals surviving in the wild.



GLADYS PORTER ZOO

Twin Grand Cayman Blue Iguanas (*Cyclura lewisi*) were hatched at the Gladys Porter Zoo in August 2005.

had been paired with Godzilla, the 60+ year-old Blue Iguana that passed away in May 2004 (see *Iguana* 11:168–171). Although copulation had been observed and the female has laid eggs nearly every year, none were fertile until she was allowed to breed with another male.

Dog Tracks Burmese Pythons in the Everglades

A detection dog is sniffing out an unusual problem — his specialty, Burmese Pythons (*Python molurus bivittatus*). Because so many non-native snakes have been released by pet owners in South Florida, the population of these snakes is growing, especially in the Everglades.

Now, a one-year-old beagle, nicknamed Python Pete, is hot on the trail of the snakes. Pete's owner and handler is wildlife technician Lori Oberhofer. She



LORI OBERHOFER (NATIONAL PARK SERVICE)

This one-year-old Burmese Python (*Python molurus bivittatus*) was caught as a hatchling in Everglades National Park and now serves as a training snake for Pete, the detector dog.



TOM BRENNAN

Mexican Garter Snakes (*Thamnophis eques*) have disappeared from much of their native range and an environmental advocacy group has accused the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service of failing to respond to a petition seeking protection for the species.

bought Pete from a Missouri breeder and had him shipped to Florida. "Beagles are used around the world," Oberhofer said. "They have a great sense of smell."

Oberhofer tests Pete's skills often by dragging snakes in a mesh bag through the grass, leaving a scent trail for Pete to track. "I don't want him to get there before me, so he is on a short leash. When he sees a python, I can see him and I can pull him back," Oberhofer said.

His twice-a-week training sessions should be finished by this winter, when it's expected that Python Pete will be ready to spring into action on a regular

basis. Once he finds snakes in the Everglades, they will be removed. From the mid-1990s to 2003, more than 50 Burmese Pythons were caught in the park. But with the surge in the snake population, last year alone, 61 of the snakes were taken out of the park. The plan is to use Pete around park roads and trails where the snakes are most likely to run into people.

WPLG
Miami, Florida; 1 July 2005

Environmentalists Sue USFWS over Mexican Garter Snake

The Center for Biological Diversity is accusing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of failing to respond to a petition seeking the protection of the Mexican Garter Snake (*Thamnophis eques*) as an endangered species. The Tucson-based

organization filed a lawsuit in an attempt to get the federal agency to act on the petition it filed more than a year ago. It says the Mexican Garter Snake has vanished from most of its native range across Arizona, southwestern New Mexico, and México, including the San Pedro, Gila, Colorado, and Santa Cruz rivers. The snake eats mostly native fish and frogs, but also may eat mice and lizards. Biologists say the snake's decline is tied to the disappearance of native fish and frogs and the declining quality of stream habitats.

KVOA
Tucson, Arizona; 19 May 2005