

FOCUS ON CONSERVATION

The Mountain Lizard of the Turimiquire Massif: Natural History and Conservation of Croizat's Skinks¹



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Croizat's Skink (*Mabuya croizati*) is endemic to the Turimiquire Massif, an isolated mountain in northeastern Venezuela. These lizards are restricted to elevations above 2,000 m. This species recently was listed as vulnerable in the Red List of Venezuelan fauna. Aspects of its population status and ecology remain enigmatic, mainly because few specimens have been collected since its initial discovery in the 1930s (although the species was not formally described until 1973).

The known geographic distribution of *Mabuya croizati* consists of only three localities, all of which have elevations above 2,000 m and comprise a total area of 8,000 ha. However, the species has been extirpated in two of these locations (including the type locality). On the other hand, at least 35 areas above 2,000 m on the Massif have yet to be surveyed for the presence of this species, but, in the last six years, only a single population was found in the "Cerro El Guamal." This locality consists of approximately 17 km² and has undergone substantial human-mediated changes, associated primarily with deforestation and the installation of radio and telecommunication antennas and their maintenance. Deforestation and agricultural activities affect 60–70% of the Turimiquire Massif.

Since 2005, Venezuelan researchers (Gilson Rivas, Tito Barros, and César Molina), Walter Schargel (University of Texas at Arlington), and Aurelien Miralles (Paris Museum) have been working intensively to discover new populations. Their investigations include multidisciplinary evaluations of ecology, natural history, and evolutionary history. Preliminary molecular analyses are intriguing and suggest that the Turimiquire Massif was previously connected with the lowlands of the Guiana Shield.

Investigators are continuing their research on the population at Guamal, with the intent of proposing to environmental officials in Venezuela that the Guamal area be set aside as a natural reserve and that radio-telecommunications activities be relocated. If you are interested in supporting this project, contact the International Reptile Conservation Foundation (IRCF).

¹ Text reviewed by Carl J. Franklin