The Texas Horned Lizard

An Illustrated Scientific Reference to Its Biology, Behavior, and Conservation

Phrynosoma cornutum

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CHAPTER 1

The Texas Horned Lizard: Identity and Appearance

A broad body, prominent head horns, and two rows of abdominal fringe scales distinguish the Texas horned lizard.

The Texas horned lizard, *Phrynosoma cornutum*, is the broad-bodied, spiny reptile often called a “horny toad.” It is a lizard, despite the familiar nickname. Its scientific name has two parts: *Phrynosoma* is the genus, the group of horned lizards to which it belongs; *cornutum* identifies the species and means “horned” (The Reptile Database, 2026; Price, 1990).

The full scientific name is often written *Phrynosoma cornutum* (Harlan, 1825). Harlan described it under the name *Agama cornuta*; the parentheses show that it was later placed in a different genus. The combination used today dates to Gray in 1831. These names connect older descriptions with modern research on the same animal (Price, 1990; ICZN, 1999a).

1.1 A distinctive outline

Horned lizards have a broad body flattened from top to bottom, with prominent head horns and pointed body scales. The Texas species has a prominent pair of occipital horns and two rows of enlarged fringe scales along each side of the abdomen. Together, these features give the species its distinctive outline. Further distinguishing features occur in the scales of the back, throat and belly (Hodges, 2001).

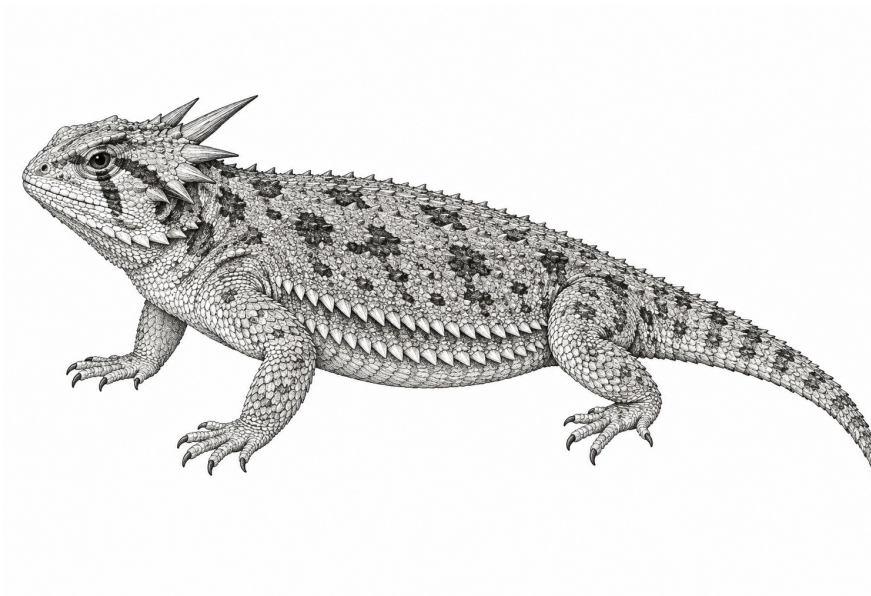


Figure 1.1. Adult Texas horned lizard, lateral view. The prominent occipital horns project behind the head, and two rows of enlarged abdominal fringe scales follow the body’s sides. The detailed dorsal and ventral anatomy appears in Chapter 4. Interpretive illustration; individual proportions and scale patterns vary. Not to scale (Price, 1990).

1.2 Color and pattern

The species has variable brown, reddish, yellow, tan or gray ground colors; a pale middorsal line; dark dorsal blotches; and neck patches behind the horns. Ground color varies with geography and substrate (Price, 1990). Color contributes to the animal’s appearance, while the arrangement of horns and scales provides more specific identification features.

1.3 Similar horned lizards

Texas horned lizards have two prominent long horns at the rear of the head. Round-tailed horned lizards have four shorter rear horns, while short-horned lizards have reduced horns. “Two long horns” describes the prominent pair, not every projection

on the head. Texas spiny lizards also appear in regional comparisons but are not horned lizards (TPWD, 2009).

The comparison below extends beyond those three familiar examples. Horned-lizard species differ in abdominal fringe rows and head armature; *P. hernandesi* has a single fringe row and short head spines (Pianka and Hodges, n.d.; National Park Service, n.d.). It is a selected comparison, not a complete identification key to the genus.

Table 1.1. Selected structural contrasts. The combination of characters supports comparison; the table does not establish local occurrence.

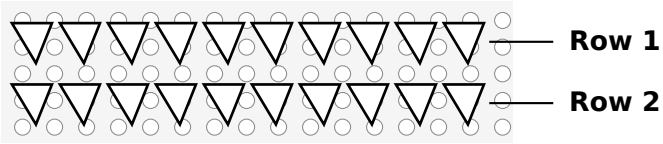
Species	Abdominal fringe	Head or other contrast
Texas, *P. cornutum*	Two rows per side	Prominent occipital pair; fine scale features described in Section 4.3.
Round-tailed, *P. modestum*	No enlarged fringe	Four short rear horns; tail rounded in cross-section.
Short-horned, *P. hernandesi*	One row per side	Reduced rear head horns.
Regal, *P. solare*	One row per side	Four large occipital horns with contacting bases.
Mountain, *P. orbiculare*	One row per side	Short occipital horns; temporal horns extend nearly as far.
Rock, *P. ditmarsi*	One row per side	Reduced, flared head armature; conspicuously deep jaws.

Two or three abdominal fringe rows occur in *P. mcallii*. Thus, two apparent rows alone are not a genus-wide guarantee of *P. cornutum* (Pianka and Hodges, n.d.). Locality narrows the plausible comparisons, while anatomy provides the identifying features.

Older references sometimes use different names or species boundaries for short-horned lizards and other closely related groups. These changes affect comparisons among records. A historical distribution account describes the evidence available at that time, rather than a current survey.

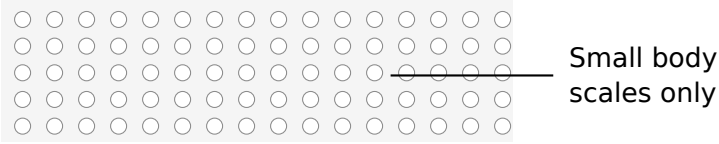
LATERAL ABDOMINAL FRINGE

P. cornutum



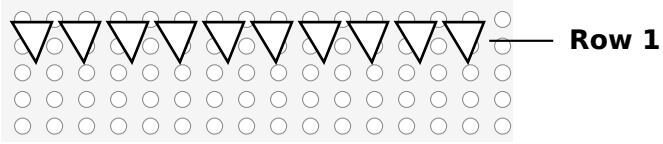
Two enlarged rows

P. modestum



No enlarged fringe

P. hernandesi



One enlarged row

Schematic flank details; not to scale.

Figure 1.2. Enlarged comparison of lateral abdominal fringe scales on one side of the body. The pointed shapes represent enlarged fringe scales; small circles represent surrounding body scales. Texas horned lizards have two fringe rows, round-tailed horned lizards lack an enlarged fringe, and short-horned lizards have one row. Spacing and scale outlines are schematic, not measurements. These diagrams isolate row count without reproducing the complete scale arrangement (Pianka and Hodges, n.d.).

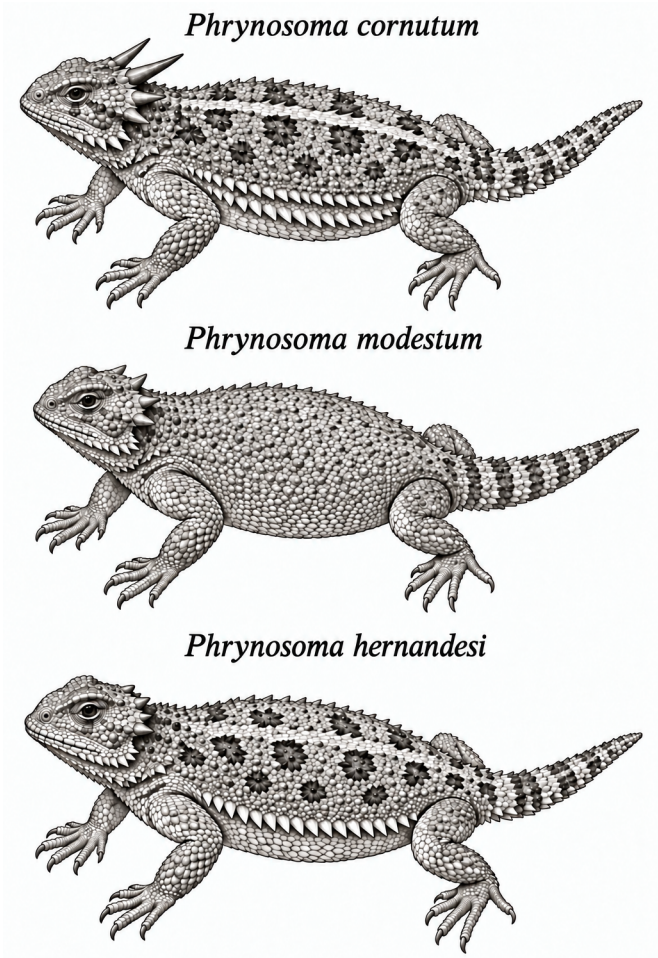


Figure 1.3. Whole-animal comparison among three horned lizards. Top: *P. cornutum*, with long occipital horns and two abdominal fringe rows. Middle: *P. modestum*, with short posterior head horns and no enlarged abdominal fringe. Bottom: *P. hernandesi*, with reduced head horns and one abdominal fringe row. Drawn sizes do not compare actual body lengths; scale patterns and poses are illustrative. Figure 1.2 isolates the fringe-row distinction at a larger scale. Neither plate forms a complete identification key (Pianka and Hodges, n.d.; National Park Service, n.d.).

1.4 Males and females

Males and females share the same broad, horned outline. Males generally have a broader tail base and more conspicuous pores on the underside of the thighs, while females have a more sharply tapering tail behind the vent (Oklahoma headstart-and-release report, 2025, p. 60). Adult size ranges overlap, so size alone does not distinguish the sexes (Price, 1990). The detailed anatomical comparison and body-size measurements appear in Section 4.7.