

THE RIVER REVIEW



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VOLUME 9, ISSUE 9





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ARTICLE INFO

The River Review is mailed monthly to all River Place residents. Residents, community groups, churches, etc. are welcome to include information about their organizations in the newsletter. Personal news for the Stork Report, Teenage Job Seekers, recipes, special celebrations, and birthday announcements are also welcome.

To submit an article for the River Review please email it to riverreview@peelinc.com. The deadline is the 15th of the month prior to the issue.

River Place

Editor Wanted!

Are you passionate
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NATURE WATCH

WIZARD LIZARDS

by Jim and Lynne Weber



'Horny toad' is the colloquial name for three species of horned lizards that are present in Texas. The Texas Horned Lizard (*Phrynosoma cornutum*) is the only one found in our area, with the Round-tailed Horned Lizard (*P. modestum*) occurring in West Texas and the Panhandle, and the Greater Short-horned Lizard (*P. hernandesi*) restricted to the higher elevations in the Trans-Pecos. All three species are protected by the state of Texas, with the Texas Horned Lizard being the first species in Texas to be granted this status.

With a proportionally small, spiny head with a blunt snout, a distinctly flattened body fringed with a double row of spiny scales, the dorsal or top side of the Texas Horned Lizard is covered with numerous small scales, each keeled or ridged down the center making them rough to the touch. The back of its head is bordered with 8 enlarged spines, four on each side, with the middle pair being the largest and often referred to as the lizard's 'horns.' Its overall color is gray or tan, with a light line down the center of its back, and a series of light-bordered brown spots on either side of the center line.

Active from late February to October, the Texas Horned Lizard is a strict dietary specialist, feeding almost exclusively of native harvester ants in the genus *Pogonomyrmex*. Estimates show that one lizard requires 20 ant colonies, and it will feed by moving from one colony to the next, consuming about 20 or so ants at each. These lizards are wizards at avoiding predators, having a wide variety of defenses. They can flatten themselves against the ground and easily blend into a substrate or forcibly stab their head spines

into the mouth of a predator, but the most fascinating defense is the ability to squirt blood from the corners of their eyes. They can aim a jet of blood directly into the face of a predator, and their blood elicits a powerful distaste that coyotes, foxes, bobcats, and even mountain lions cannot tolerate.

In the past, the Texas Horned Lizard was present in all parts of Texas except for the southeast and the extreme northeast portions of Texas. Populations began to decline after huge numbers of these lizards were shipped across the country as part of the commercial reptile trade, only to perish due to the lack of harvester ants as a main staple of their diet. Since then, the decline has continued, mainly as a result of broad pesticide use to control imported red fire ants that has also resulted in the loss of harvester ants from the landscape. Today, these lizards have largely been extirpated east of I-35 and I-37, except in a few localities with sandy soil. If you'd like to get involved in helping Texas Parks & Wildlife gather information on the presence, abundance and decline of this species, join the citizens science project by the Texas Nature Trackers called the Texas Horned Lizard Watch, which is available on their website.

Send your nature-related questions to naturewatch@austin.rr.com and we'll do our best to answer them. If you enjoy reading these articles, check out our books, *Nature Watch Austin*, *Nature Watch Big Bend*, and *Native Host Plants for Texas Butterflies*, (all published by Texas A&M University Press), and our blog at naturewatchaustin.blogspot.com.



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RIVER OTTERS

By Cheryl Conley, TWRC Wildlife Center



Most people assume that the animal they are seeing in area lakes and streams is a beaver but it could be a river otter. Most people don't realize that we have otters in our area.

River otters are fascinating little creatures. They are semi-aquatic spending about two-thirds of their time on land and the other third in the water. They live in dens called holts, near water, that have several tunnel openings with at least one leading them directly to a lake, stream, inland wetland or marsh. Their webbed feet and powerful tails make them strong swimmers. When they're in the water, their nostrils and ears close to keep water out. They have a third eyelid, or nictitating membrane, that acts like the goggles we wear when we swim. It protects the eyes and helps them to see underwater. They can dive up to 60 feet and can hold their breath for up to eight minutes.

The diet of the river otter is mainly made up of aquatic organisms including fish, turtles, frogs, crayfish, etc. but since they're semi-aquatic, they've also been known to eat small mammals like squirrels and mice.

River otters are good communicators and have a variety of vocalizations. They yelp, whistle, growl and chirp and when threatened, they emit a scream that can be heard up to a mile and a half away!

Although they live alone or in pairs, river otters are very social and playful—guess you could call them party animals. The playful furballs roll down hills, juggle pebbles, wrestle, frolic in the water and even build themselves slides along the banks of rivers.

If you need assistance with an injured, orphaned or displaced animal, give us a call. In most cases, the animal doesn't need rescuing but we will help you make that determination. If the animal does need help, we will walk you through the process to keep both you and the animal safe. Our phone number is 713.468.TWRC. Our website has helpful information as well. www.twrcwildlifecenter.org

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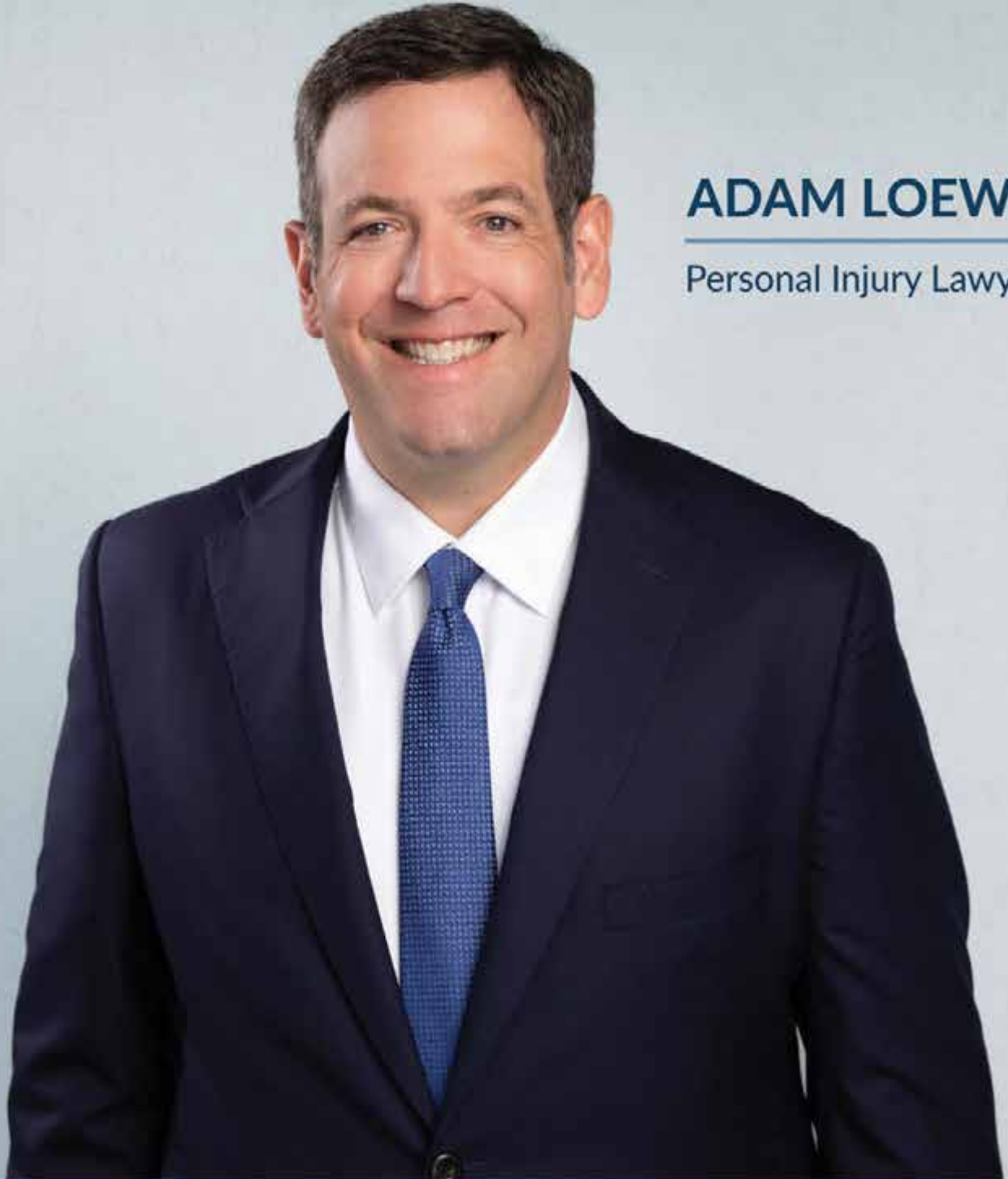


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