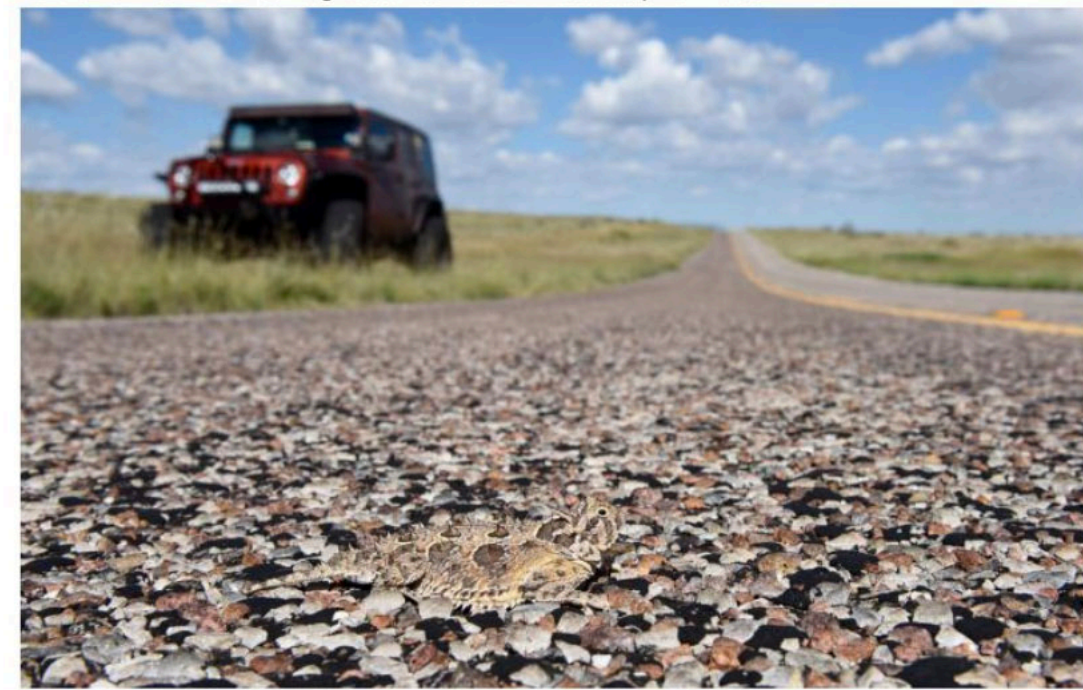


Texas Horned Lizard on a grasslands road. Photo: Stephen Fallick



In the United States, there are several “bucket list” destinations that attract dozens of field herping enthusiasts and other naturalists alike from around the world to admire the local biodiversity, scenery, and culture. Undoubtedly, seasoned herpers are among the only groups of people on earth who are likely to know what both “Robert Is Here” and “Cow Dog” are (both excellent pre-herping snack stops in the Florida Everglades and West Texas respectively) or the meaning of “hiking stumps” or “shining cuts”. It is no coincidence that certain areas occasionally draw frustratingly large crowds of field herpers: these places are among the most herpetologically diverse in the world and are home to some of the nation’s most beautiful and impressive animals. No other place I’ve been fortunate enough to visit exemplifies the ingenuity and quirks of herper culture in a scene of unrivaled beauty and fascinating biodiversity quite like the Trans-Pecos region of West Texas. With emphasis on quirks, this region is vastly different from the rest of the nation and for first-time visitors, especially herpers, it can be a lot to take in!

The Trans-Pecos region of West Texas is a rather loosely defined area, but generally refers to the portion of West Texas that lies mostly west of the Pecos River in habitats characteristic of the Chihuahuan Desert. With vast expanses of empty highways dotted with small towns, most human activity in the region is centered around the cities of Alpine, Fort Davis, and Marfa that form a triangle in the heart of West Texas and along the I-10 corridor along the northern extent of the region. Alpine, home to Sul Ross State University, is the largest city in

the region (with the exception of El Paso over 200 miles to the west on the New Mexico border) and is the last stop for fast food and reasonably priced gas for tourists visiting Big Bend National Park and Terlingua to the south. Many herpers who visit West Texas either establish home base in Alpine to herp the comparatively lush Davis Mountains, or choose to stay in Sanderson 80 miles to the east at the Outback Oasis Hotel that is owned by fellow herpers Roy and Ruth Engeldorf. Some brave the uncomfortable heat of the southern Big Bend Region along the River Road that runs only a few yards from the Rio Grande and Mexico, and others venture to the easternmost reaches of the Trans-Pecos in the vicinity of the Pecos and Devil’s Rivers. Among these more popular areas for naturalists and herpers lie dozens of hidden gems: small mountain ranges, obscure ghost towns, State Parks, and Wildlife Management Areas. Vast tracts of private ranchland separate the publicly accessible property creating the illusion that this massive region is smaller than it really is. Even still, with so many

options for where to herp, you’d think the chances of running into someone you know on top of a mountain, in a canyon deep in the Davis Mountains, or at McDonalds in Alpine would be pretty slim, right? Wrong.

Herper culture is everywhere in West Texas, so much so that the hardware store in Alpine sells snake hooks. Each summer, dozens if not hundreds of herpers from across the globe flock to West Texas in pursuit of serpents. Most have a bad case of tunnel vision, with their pursuits justifiably focused on locating one particularly elusive and beautiful snake: the Gray-banded Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis alterna*). Gray-banded Kingsnakes are mostly nocturnal, with very few documentations of diurnal activity. These bug-eyed snakes can vary anywhere from almost solid black to the popular “Blair’s Phase” with wide vibrant orange bands on a gray background. Almost everyone who comes to West Texas revolves their trip around seeing one of these secretive serpents, and very few are lucky enough to find one. Many like to keep them as

Herping

the Trans-Pecos

By Noah Fields

pets, collecting different localities to breed and give or sell to friends, while others simply enjoy the adrenaline rush of seeing an elusive and vibrant snake in their flashlight beam only to release it a few moments later. Some people have gone their whole lives without seeing an alterna, while others find multiple in one night, but no one will say that these snakes are easy to find. Most target them by shining road cuts (man-made rock faces in hilly or mountainous terrain caused by blowing the rock away for the creation of highways) at night. Alterna are strongly associated with rocky habitat that has numerous deep fissures, and road cuts in hilly areas can provide a peek into what goes on underground in otherwise rather featureless habitat such as that in the vicinity of the town

of Langtry. Despite looking almost similar from the perspective of a car to the sandy grasslands found further west in the Trans-Pecos that harbor no resident alterna and have little to no rock, extensive fractured limestone exists underground here and alterna are found potentially in greater numbers than anywhere else. In other parts of their range, such as the Chisos and Davis Mountains, Gray-banded Kingsnakes inhabit stunning sky islands with comparably mild temperatures that rise up out of the harsh desert below. Rocky areas in the lower desert are also home to alterna that can prove especially difficult to find. Like other *Lampropeltis*, Gray-banded Kingsnake activity is strongly tied to moisture, and in the Chihuahuan Desert this presents a rather obvious issue. On

average, the Chihuahuan Desert collectively receives less than 10 inches of rain per year. Luckily, the rain is rather predictable and falls almost entirely during the summer months largely due to the monsoon season that brings almost daily thunderstorms to the region from July through September. However, it is commonly believed that these snakes prefer not to move in the rain or when the ground is soaked from a recent rain. Truthfully, no one has pinned down exactly how to reliably find alterna but people have had staggering success by following rain patterns which vary seasonably between localities. Generally, the eastern Trans-Pecos region gets rainfall earlier in the season in late May and early June making this a popular time to hunt alterna there.

Rock Cut in the Davis Mountains as a summer Monsoon rolls in. Photo: Noah Fields



The Pecos River High Bridge near Langtry Texas. Photo: Ben Stupavsky

On the other hand, the far western Trans-pecos may not get any rain until the monsoon season arrives in July. Adapting to the current weather and reading the climate of where you are looking for alterna can be your best friend when targeting these mysterious snakes, aside from old fashioned good luck!

While Gray-banded Kingsnakes are certainly the snake that draws the most people to West Texas, the region is far from being a one-trick pony. The herp diversity in the region offers something for everybody! The Trans-Pecos is home to two more *Lampropeltis*: the Desert Kingsnake (*L. splendida*) (which is commonly found in the Desert Grassland habitats where one is extremely unlikely to find alterna), and the taxonomically unstable local

Milk Snake (*L. triangulum*) (which can be found in virtually any habitat in the region with the exception of the harshest and driest desert, but is common nowhere). The region is also home to six species of Rattlesnake, at least 5 of which can be found on the same road in a few special places. The ever present Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*) dominates all habitats, and the Mojave Rattlesnake is found in equal numbers in many areas in the central and western Trans-Pecos. Prairie Rattlesnakes (*C. viridis*) and the elusive Desert Massasauga are restricted largely to the intact grasslands of the central and western Trans-pecos. In rocky areas likely to harbor Gray-banded Kingsnakes, the beautiful Ornate Black-tailed Rattlesnake (*C. molossus*) and Mottled Rock Rattlesnake (*C. lepidus*) can be

found. Another subspecies of Rock Rattlesnake (*C. lepidus*), the Banded Rock Rattlesnake (*C. l. klauberi*), is found only in extreme West Texas in the vicinity of El Paso, an area that hosts an unusual conglomeration of species more typical of southern Arizona and New Mexico alongside most of the typical Trans-Pecos species. Alongside the impressive Rattlesnake diversity, venomous snake enthusiasts can hope to encounter seemingly out of place Trans-Pecos Copperheads (*Agkistrodon contortrix pictigaster*) (recently lumped in with Broad-banded Copperheads) and Texas Coral Snakes (*Micrurus tener*), both of which are tied to closely to habitats that maintain surface water or get atypically high precipitation for the region. For the Ratsnake enthusiast, the unique and aptly named Trans-Pecos Ratsnake ranges throughout

the region and up into southern New Mexico. Commonly referred to as “subocs” by local herpers, their interesting scientific name (*Bogertophis subocularis*), striking pattern, calm disposition, comically large eyeballs, and status as the only United States representative of their genus make them a popular and commonly found target of visiting herpers. Lucky snake hunters in the southern Big Bend region could encounter the coveted “Blonde” morph, a naturally occurring anomaly where the bold striping along the back is mostly or completely absent resulting in a stunningly solid creamy gold to white snake. For the herpers who enjoy the more unusual snakes, West Texas is home to the largest centipede eating Tantilla in the United States: the Trans-Pecos Black-headed Snake (*Tantilla cucullata*). Like alterna, these snakes are bizarrely secretive and have stumped some herpers hoping to see them while others find them semi-regularly. For readers who have seen Tantilla in other parts of the nation, imagine finding one that is over two feet long and as big around as an adult’s finger, capable of subduing

and eating the massive Scolopendra centipedes that can grow to over 8 inches long (about the size of the rest of the United State’s Tantilla species)! If you’re a well rounded herper that enjoys finding legged species too, the Trans-pecos is home to an impressive lizard diversity and, surprisingly, a number of fascinating amphibians. Three species of Horned Lizard inhabit West Texas and are popular bycatch while looking for diurnal snakes: the Greater Short-horned Lizard (*Phrynosoma hernandesi*), Round-tailed Horned Lizard (*P. modestum*), and the charismatic Texas Horned Lizard (*P. cornutum*) that can be found on most roads through open grasslands in the mornings and late afternoon. Of all the lizards in West Texas, perhaps the most fascinating is the Reticulated Gecko (*Coleonyx reticulatus*). These ghostly pale lizards were described to science as recently as 1958, and spend most of their time underground. Twice to three times the size of the more common Texas Banded Gecko (*C. brevis*), these comparatively large lizards are restricted to the southern Big Bend region in the United States and have

been documented only in several far disjunct populations in Mexico to the south. Of the amphibians native to West Texas, the Barking Frog (*Craugastor augusti*) stands out as the most unusual and sought after by herpers. These medium sized frogs are larger than a Leopard Frog (*Lithobates sp.*) but smaller than a Bull Frog (*L. catesbeianus*) and were once thought to be exclusively crevice dwelling frogs from the limestone of the Texas Hill Country and eastern Trans-Pecos. Interestingly, a population in the grasslands of the central Trans-Pecos appears to be living and potentially breeding in Prairie Dog burrows!

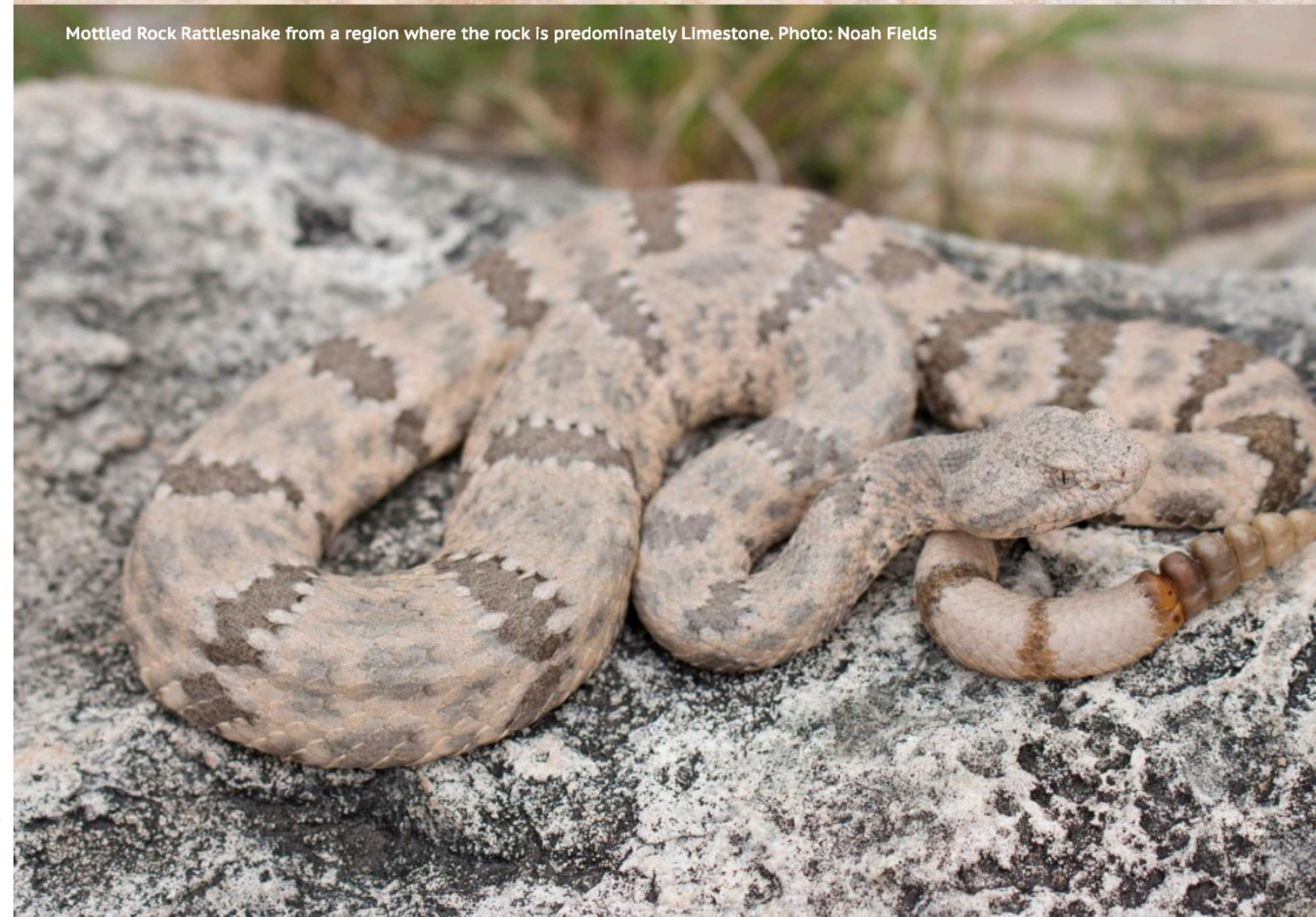
This only covers the tip of the iceberg of herp diversity in the Trans-Pecos, and the diversity is only a small part of the appeal of West Texas for field herpers! On a good night in the right places at the right time of year, it would not be unheard of to encounter over 50 snakes in a few hours of cruising, mostly Rattlesnakes. Under the right conditions, flipping artificial cover can produce armfuls of the vibrant pink Western Coachwhips famously found in the Big Bend region. The sunsets in the region are among the best in the nation, and the night sky over West Texas is one of the darkest in the United States making for incredible nights spent under the stars. Watching a monsoon season thunderstorm roll over the grasslands from high in the Davis Mountains is one of the best ways to kill time waiting for darkness to fall to shine cuts. Regardless of whether you’re chasing a rare kingsnake or just an East Coast herper looking to venture west and see new species, a trip to the Trans-Pecos is sure to be one you’ll never forget! 🌵



Alterna Phase Gray-banded Kingsnake. Photo: Noah Fields



Blair's Phase Gray-banded Kingsnake. Photo: Noah Fields



Mottled Rock Rattlesnake from a region where the rock is predominately Limestone. Photo: Noah Fields