

Reticulate collared lizards are rare and attractive

by Jim Seeden



In terms of its very distinctive and attractive appearance, few other wild things in the Valley can match today's subject, the reticulate collared lizard.

In 20 years, I've only seen three. If you're ever extremely fortunate and see one, it will be easy to identify. First, notice that it's reticulated, which means that it looks netted. The netting is light colored with most of the openings in the net tannish-

brown but some are black. The ventral side is white to cream colored.

Next, observe that it's about 16 inches long with the tail being twice the length of the head and body. Unlike many lizards, the head is fairly wide and the neck slender.

They're called collared lizards because the males have a black collar. It's not a complete collar except during mating season when it's more complete and the chest becomes yellow. Female collars are also faint, but during mating season they develop orange bars on their ventral side.

If you're really, really lucky and see a male displaying, you'll see him bob his head and do push-ups. He may also extend the dewlap on his chin. It's gray with some small black dots. It's used to intimidate rivals and to attract females.

This distinctive lizard is only found along the Rio Grande Valley of southern Texas and northeastern Mexico in rocky, gravelly, sandy terrane. We're fortunate to be in their range, the Tamaulipan thorn-scrub.

It's carnivorous and eats mostly grasshoppers and other insects but will also prey on spiders, tiny mammals and reptiles. Rarely, it may eat a small fruit.

When seen, it's usually basking in the sun on a rock or post. When disturbed it'll scamper off into a burrow or, more likely, under a near-by bush and freeze. With caution, you may then move closer for a better look.

A reticulate's hind legs are twice the size of the forelegs and, when needing real speed, it raises the front of its body and runs bipedal, as we do, on just its hind legs.

Reticulate collared lizards are the rarest of the collared lizards and are on the list of threatened species. They're protected by law but the inexorable loss of habitat may doom them. I feel privileged to have observed them several times. It was memorable each time and I wish the same opportunities for you.