



Sungazer Lizards are desperately in need of conservation

By Bradley Gibbons Field Officer for the EWT's Threatened Grassland Species Programme

The Sungazer Lizard *Smaug giganteus* is also known as the Giant Girdled Lizard and is the largest of the girdled lizards. With a length of up to 40 cm, they are large and have a distinctive yellow underside and brown top surface with the girdled appearance on the head. Sungazers have a very slow growth rate which can be explained by females only giving birth to one or two live young every second year. Furthermore they do not breed in captivity. They are endemic to South Africa and live in the Highveld grasslands of the central to northern Free State and southern Mpumalanga. The generic name *Smaug* is a reference to the dragon in the Tolkien novel *The Hobbit*. This is both a result of the seeming resemblance of this species to a dragon and the fact that Tolkien himself was born in the Free State and it is thought that much of the scenery and background to the book was influenced by his experiences on the eastern slopes of the Drakensberg.

Their numbers are declining and the species is listed as *Vulnerable* by the IUCN. This is based on a limited dataset from 1978 and this is currently under review. Unlike most lizards, they are not dependent on rocky outcrops or hard surfaces, but live on gently sloping grasslands where they have self-excavated burrows extending up to 42 cm below the surface. The colonies are made up of burrows and males are separated from females by living in a separate colony adjoining the female colony.

Threats include trade, which is both for the pet and muti-market. The white powder secreted by Sungazers on their tails is used for traditional medicine. Sungazers are registered as Threatened or Protected Species in South Africa, in addition to being a CITES registered species, and this means that collecting, possessing or trading any of these animals requires a permit. Any person caught with live or dead Sungazers without a permit is liable to legal prosecution.

Habitat destruction and disturbance is another of the threats facing Sungazer Lizards as entire colonies can be eradicated at a time. Habitat loss is primarily a result of the conversion of virgin grasslands to agriculture as well as developments such as mining and construction. The solution would be to protect as many colonies as possible from developments as well as monitor and implement preventative measures to minimise threats such as trade.

Landowners with Sungazer colonies can assist the long term conservation of the species and secure their own properties through the conservation stewardship approach. Stewardship is a voluntary process that allows landowners to commit to the sustainable utilisation of land. The landowners will maintain productive agricultural practices, but will ensure that the species diversity and ecosystem integrity found on the farm will be maintained in a manner that will secure areas with high biodiversity value for future generations. This will ultimately benefit species in need of conservation such as Sungazers.

If you know of any colonies of Sungazers or more information about trade or other threats, please report them to the Endangered Wildlife Trust by phoning 011 372 3600 or sending an e-mail to

Bradley Gibbons at bradleyg@ewt.org.za. The EWT's work with Sungazers is sponsored by the National Lottery Distribution Fund.



Example of a Sungazer found in a grassland in the Free State