

Darling Downs earless dragon



Darling Downs earless dragon habitat © Alison Goodland

Description

The Darling Downs earless dragon is a small, plump, spiny earless lizard that grows to an average size of 12 centimetres. This lizard is well camouflaged, ranging from chocolate or reddish-brown to almost black in colour, marbled with lighter cream. Prominent, thin pale stripes run down the middle of the back and along each flank. Young are dark slaty black in colour.

The chin and throat, normally pale, may be seen occasionally with an orange flush, believed to be breeding colours. This species has a pink mouth-lining, short tail and scaly skin covering the ears, giving the appearance of being earless.

Distribution

The Darling Downs earless dragon is currently thought to be restricted to the Condamine floodplain region of the Darling Downs in southern Queensland. It has been recorded from Jimbour, Bongeen, Bowenville, Brookstead and Mt Tyson areas across this region.

Habitat

This dragon species is only known to survive in an intensely cropped area in the Darling Downs. Prior to cropping, this area was natural treeless grassland. The soil is cracking black clay, providing the lizard with ample shelter. Like most dragons, it prefers to forage in more open ground areas, and uses cultivated areas that can provide both cover and care areas.

Ecology and Life Cycle

The Darling Downs earless dragon, like most dragons, is active during daylight hours and has been found perched upon mounds of soil or stubble, sunning and waiting for prey to pass. They tend to run quickly into grass tussocks, stubble and down cracks in the soil when disturbed.

Their reproductive biology is largely unknown, however pregnant females have been seen in mid-spring/summer and hatchlings observed in the late summer. This lizard is known to eat ants and other small invertebrates.



Scientific Name:

Tympanocryptis pinguicolla

Conservation Status

Endangered -
Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999
(National)

Endangered - *Nature Conservation Act 1992*
(Queensland)

The taxonomy of this population is in dispute. This particular lizard may be a completely new species or an outlying population of another species of earless dragon. Further work is planned on the genetics of this lizard.



Darling Downs earless dragon © Carly Starr



Cracking black clay soils © Alison Goodland

Key Threats

Feral Animals: The Darling Downs earless dragon is vulnerable to predation by foxes and feral cats.

Changes in land use practices: Future changes in farming systems, such as an increase in pesticide use, a new pesticide or reversion to broadacre cropping practices, may have a detrimental impact on this species population.

Soil structure decline: *Lippia Phyla canescens* is a major threat to the maintenance of soil structure in cracking clay soils across this dragon's range. *Lippia* dries out the soil profile and out-competes other native ground cover, exposing the soil to erosion and soil structure decline. This soil's distinctive 'cracks' collapse, reducing shelter and refuge sites for this species. The

loss of ground cover also leaves the dragon exposed and unsheltered when the cracks close up after rainfall.

Inappropriate roadside management: Roadsides and road reserves often provide suitable reptile habitat. These areas are often islands of native vegetation in a fragmented landscape providing important refuge sites. Threats can arise from inappropriate roadside burns, slashing and road widening.

Did You Know?

The Darling Downs earless dragon has been heard to vocalise with a high pitched hiss as a juvenile, and adults with a high pitched squeak from an open mouth.

How to help

- Maintain large, healthy, connected patches of native grassland vegetation and avoid ploughing remnant strips/patches of native grassland.
- Maintain grassed waterways, roadsides and headlands in paddocks.
- Be cautious when changing a farming practice and undertake farming practices that minimize soil structure decline.
- Be vigilant with feral cat and fox control measures.
- Reduce the spread of, and control, *Lippia* where possible. Maintenance of a healthy ground layer is vitally important.
- Ensure grazing practices are sustainable, maintaining greater than 70% ground cover.
- If burning, use cool burns in a mosaic pattern that promote patchiness and leave areas of ground cover unburnt.
- Consider entering into a conservation agreement (e.g. Land for Wildlife, Nature Refuges or incentive agreements through grant programs) for conservation and land management assistance.
- Report sightings to WWF-Australia, the Queensland Museum or the EPA/QPWS. Taking a photo of live or dead specimens is useful to help identification.
- More research is required on the genetics of the *Tympanocryptis* genus, including the Darling Downs earless dragon.

To find out more about saving threatened species check out www.wwf.org.au/tsn or contact the Threatened Species Network at tsn@wwf.org.au.



The Threatened Species Network is a community-based program of the Australian Government and WWF-Australia.

