

# Outdoor Recreation *is* Outdoor Education

Harvester ants (*Pogonomyrmex* spp.) are the large, red or black ants that make nests with big, circular mounds covered with tiny pebbles.

They get their name from collecting seeds (grasses are favored) from many different types of plants and bringing them back to the nest. You may even find a trash pile of rejected seed near a nest opening. No water is needed as the ants get what little they need from the seeds they collect. While seeds are the primary food, dead animals and insects may also be scavenged.



The colony consists of a mother (the queen) and nothing but females. Males are only produced for a short time solely for the purpose of mating with the queen, and then the winged reproductive males (called "alates") die shortly after. A queen may mate with multiple males to increase genetic diversity of her daughters. Up to 10,000 ants may exist in a colony.



Nest temperature can be regulated by adding or taking away light-colored material like stones or even snail shell. Lighter-colored material like this reflects more sunlight, resulting in a cooling effect. The area immediately around nest openings is kept clear of vegetation to allow the sun to warm the nest.

Horned lizards (*Phrynosoma* spp.) depend greatly on harvester ants, which make up over 90% of their diet. You can see why such a dietary specialist might be vulnerable to changes to their environment.



Texas horned lizard

Horned lizard numbers have declined because of many factors, but one is certainly the loss of harvester ants. In some areas, harvester ants have declined because of pesticide use and the invasion of the non-native fire ant (*Solenopsis invicta*), which out-compete and kill native harvesters.

Harvester ants are also important seed dispersers, carrying seeds - some of which inevitably germinate and grow - to new areas.



New Mexico Department of Game and Fish

[www.wildlife.state.nm.us](http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us)

888-248-6866

