

Tropidosaura essexi Hewitt, 1927

ESSEX'S MOUNTAIN LIZARD

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Global: Least Concern

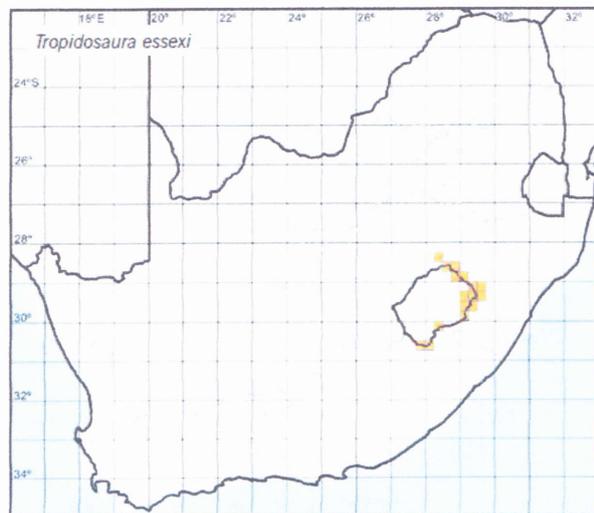
Endemic

Taxonomy: Although *Tropidosaura essexi* and *T. montana natalensis* are morphologically very similar, these taxa are grouped in different clades (*T. essexi* with *T. cottrelli*, and *T. montana* with *T. gularis*) (Engleder *et al.* 2013; M.J. Cunningham unpubl. data). There is substantial geographical variation within *T. essexi* with regard to the number of femoral pores, colour pattern, and mitochondrial DNA sequences. This variation appears to be bimodal and further investigation is needed to determine whether or not this reflects the presence of cryptic taxa within *T. essexi* (M.J. Cunningham unpubl. data).

Distribution: Endemic to the *Atlas* region and largely restricted to the Maloti-Drakensberg highlands of Lesotho and the South African provinces of Free State, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape. It extends from near Clarens in the Free State (Bates 1996a) southwards to the vicinity of Rhodes in the Eastern Cape. Bourquin's (2004) record at 2730AD on the KwaZulu-Natal/Mpumalanga border, which refers to a specimen collected in 1971, is rejected because this locality is situated far from any other known records of the species (or any other *Tropidosaura*) and falls in a different bioregion (Mesic Highveld Grassland); the museum specimen may have been mislabeled. There appears to be altitudinal separation between *T. essexi* and the morphologically similar *T. montana natalensis*, which occurs at lower elevations.

Habitat: Terrestrial and diurnal, usually found in short basalt grasslands and afroalpine heathlands on the high escarpment slopes and summit plateau (2 392–3 337 m) of the Maloti-Drakensberg highlands in the Grassland Biome. Often found in thick vegetation at the edges of streams, around loose rock in wetlands or at the base of rock faces (M.J. Cunningham pers. obs.; Branch 1998).

Vegetation type: Gd 10 Drakensberg Afroalpine Heathland; Gd 8 Lesotho Highland Basalt Grassland; Gd 7 uKhahlamba Basalt Grassland; Gd6 Drakensberg-Amatole Afromontane Fynbos.



Tropidosaura essexi—Top of Chain Ladder, Drakensberg, FS M.F. Bates

Assessment rationale: Fairly widespread and common. There are indications of intensification of grazing by stock across the Lesotho highlands and in adjacent areas of South Africa above the escarpment, including areas inhabited by *T. essexi* (Stewart 2001). Climate change (warming) may reduce available habitat and therefore constitutes a threat to this species, which has limited opportunity for compensatory migration. Despite these threats, there is no evidence that *T. essexi* has declined. It is intrinsically threatened by its relatively restricted range and the occurrence of frequent anthropogenic fires in some areas. Occurs in the same general area as *T. cottrelli* but is more widespread and common.

Conservation measures: None recommended.