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Darwinian struggle for a place on the endangered species list

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It was mixed news as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that it would move forward on a review of 29 plant and animal species to assess their inclusion on the federal endangered species list.

On the other hand, the service rejected petitions for nine species, including the ash storm-petrel, a California seabird.

The mere fact that the agency is considering listing any species represents a change from the last eight years. But for those whose petitions were denied, the news was dire.

“Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar is continuing a Bush-era approach of denying protections to species based on an incomplete and selective interpretation of the science,” said Shaye Wolf, a seabird biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. “The decision reads like a laundry list of excuses to avoid acting to protect the ash storm-petrel rather than a solid evaluation of the science.”

The ash storm-petrel is a small gray pelagic bird that lives almost exclusively on California's offshore islands, busy areas where pollution, development and increased predation have driven down the bird's populations.

“Given the rapid decline of the ash storm-petrel, this decision might have been our last chance to save this seabird from extinction,” said Gary Langham, director of bird conservation for Audubon California. “I truly hope that we don't back on this moment several years from now and regret our inaction.”

Luckier were the 20 plant, six snail, two insect and one fish species that were selected to undergo a status review to determine whether they warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The biggest threat to the species under consideration is loss of habitat. However, the Fish and Wildlife Service considered climate change as an issue with a handful of species, including the mist forestfly, which depends on glacier-fed streams in Glacier National Park for survival.

Alas for the forestfly, the glaciers at Glacier National Park are in fast retreat and are predicted to disappear altogether by 2030.

The 20 plants for which the service issued a positive finding are: Yellowstone sand verbena, Ross' bentgrass, Hamilton milkvetch, Isely milkvetch, skiff milkvetch, precocious milkvetch,

Cisco milkvetch, Schmoll milkvetch, Fremont County rockcress, boat-shaped bugseed, Pipe Springs cryptantha, Weber whitlowgrass, Brandegee's wild buckwheat, Frisco buckwheat, Ostler's peppergrass, Lesquerella navajoensis (a bladderpod), Flowers' penstemon, Gibben's beardtongue, pale blue-eyed grass and Frisco clover.

The fish is the northern leatherside chub, the two insects are the Platte River caddisfly and mist forestfly (or meltwater lednian stonefly).

The six snails are the frigid ambersnail, Bearmouth mountainsnail, Byrne Resort mountainsnail, longitudinal gland pyrg, Hamlin Valley pyrg and sub-globose snake pyrg.

-- Julie Cart

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