

## The leaky ark

Nature reserves don't protect them. Federal law spurns them. Why are Nevada's imperiled species falling through the cracks?

by ANDREW KIRALY

CONSIDER the relict leopard frog. This olive-spotted amphibian lives in six springs in Lake Mead National Recreation Area, but life is hardly a vacation for the thousand or so frogs who call the area home. Between water development at the lake, invasive plants, overzealous partiers, feral burros and other hassles, they're living on the edge of extinction.

What's that you say? Dial up the feds and get that frog on the endangered species list, pronto? Environmental groups did that in 2002, but the government gave them the run-around, basically putting the frog a very long waiting list. The enviros have since sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for dragging its feet.

**The frog is just the tip of the, uh, iceberg:** The precarious position of the relict leopard frog -- living on unprotected land while it waits in line for federal protection -- is par for the course for nearly 400 imperiled species in Nevada, including the Amargosa toad, the white-margined penstemon and the Sand Mountain blue butterfly. These species are falling through the cracks of both state reserve systems and federal conservation laws. That's the startling conclusion of a study published last month in the journal *Biodiversity and Conservation*.

"The key finding is that when you look at Nevada's most imperiled species, the majority of them are not protected either by reserves or the Endangered Species Act," says Noah Greenwald, science director of the Center for Biological Diversity, and one of the authors of the study along with Curtis Bradley.

**What's not endangered? Irony, of course:** It's not that Nevada isn't a welcoming place for burgeoning



PHOTO BY TOM BRENNAN

The relict leopard frog hates it when water czars suck his pond dry.

biological life. The opposite, actually. Scientists chose Nevada for this study because it's considered rich in biodiversity, with more species than 40 other states. Also, Nevada has a relatively high 14 percent of its land designated as reserves. That can take the form of wilderness areas, national parks, national wildlife refuges, Nature Conservancy preserves and other areas.

**It's like a blind date that just doesn't work out:** But the study found a glaring mismatch between reserves and imperiled species. Basically, about half of the 384 species scientists considered are barely present in reserves -- where they'd presumably find better protection. And 180 of those species weren't on any reserves or protected areas at all. And of the 19 imperiled species "hot spots" fingered by the authors -- areas where the imperiled species were clustered --

seven were totally unprotected. Some activists aren't surprised.

"Often we put the term 'protected areas' in quotes, because having an area designated alone doesn't do the job," says Jim Moore of the Nature Conservancy, one of the few groups that stewards land to save species versus, say, giving picnickers somewhere pretty to snap photos.

**Do you guys think you can, like, move, please?**

Take the white-margined penstemon, with its purple corolla that looks like an exotic champagne glass. One favorite place for this species just happens to be the future site of the proposed Ivanpah Airport. Or there's the Sand Mountain blue butterfly, with its black- and rust-dappled wings that resemble tiny Oriental fans. Its only home on the planet is the dune Sand Mountain, east of Fallon.

The Bureau of Land Management runs Sand Mountain as a recreational site for off-roaders.

**Reservations required:** The problem is that reserves in Nevada aren't created with imperiled species in mind. "We don't have a reservation system created for protecting species," says Rob Mrowka of the Center for Biological Diversity. "They're created for things like scenic value and remoteness."

Adds Greenwald: "The reserve system doesn't protect imperiled species sufficiently, and doesn't protect areas where there are concentrations of imperiled species."

**Well, thank heavens we have the Endangered Species Act ... right? Wrong.** You'd think the Endangered Species Act would step in where the reserve system drops the ball -- or frog or butterfly, as the case may be -- but the study finds that this net has plenty of holes in it as well. Of more than 200 imperiled species unprotected by reserves, only about 20 are either designated endangered species or getting some form of alternate protection.



PHOTO BY ROB MROWKA

The Las Vegas bearpoppy hates it when rednecks off-road all over its pretty face.

**It always comes back to George W. Bush, doesn't it?** Why aren't the bulk of these species protected by the government? Because the Bush administration has been infamously slow -- some would say baldly reluctant -- in protecting flora and fauna in danger.

"Many of the species that at least should have been evaluated under the act just haven't been," says Greenwald. "In part, they have just been falling way behind on new species. They have a backlog of 280 species that are candidates. They just haven't been doing their job."

**Easier said than done, but still:** The solution? The state should consider expanding some of its reserves to account for more than hikers and birdwatchers and interesting rocks, and work imperiled species into the mix.

"We really don't have a well-planned reserve system" says Mrowka. "That's why we got what we got. We have a reserve system that occupies quite a bit of land, but it's not always in the right places."