

## Sand Mountain blue butterfly numbers up

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The Sand Mountain blue butterfly sits on a branch at Sand Mountain Recreation Area, east of Fallon.

A recent count of a unique Nevada butterfly shows the insect thriving in surprising numbers, leading some experts to conclude its listing under the Endangered Species Act may not be necessary.

But one conservation group counters that listing as an endangered or threatened species is likely the only way to save the Sand Mountain blue butterfly from certain extinction.

Opinions continue to differ over the future of the butterfly, which exists only at a set of towering sand dunes near Fallon that are popular to off-roaders.

Last month, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to conduct a yearlong review into whether the butterfly should be protected under the Endangered Species Act. Officials said the step is justified because off-road vehicles have destroyed much of the dune vegetation, Kearney buckwheat, that the butterfly needs to survive.

The decision came as researchers from the University of Nevada, Reno finished a first-of-its-kind count of the butterfly population. Scientists said they found a thick concentration of butterflies in areas where their host vegetation still survives.

How many?

"Our guess is that there's on the order of a half-million or more butterflies at Sand Mountain," UNR biologist Dennis Murphy said. "The most heartening finding is that the butterfly appears to inhabit all of the dune areas that support its host plant, and there's many tens of thousands of plants still remaining."

Coupled with a soon-to-be finalized conservation plan crafted by Fish and Wildlife, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management,

local governments, environmentalists and off-road vehicles groups, the encouraging butterfly count could mean the butterfly's listing won't be necessary, Murphy said.

Bob Williams, field supervisor for the Nevada office of U.S. Fish and Wildlife, said he is "pretty confident" listing of the butterfly will not be necessary.

"This has proven to be a pretty hardy species in surviving the assault, and that gives me confidence," Murphy said. "It's highly unlikely this species is going to fall off the cliff and disappear."

Not so, counters Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist for the Center for Biological Diversity. That group was among several that petitioned the butterfly for potential listing in 2004 and later sued, alleging U.S. Fish and Wildlife had failed to adequately respond to that petition.

Patterson described the agency's August decision to continue the process that could ultimately end in the butterfly's listing as "very significant" considering a reluctance by the Bush administration to proceed with such actions.

"The situation at Sand Mountain is so dire not even this administration could deny there's a real threat of extinction of the Sand Mountain blue butterfly," Patterson said.

Insights offered

Others insist the conservation strategy offers a strong opportunity to both protect the butterfly and allow continued off-highway vehicle recreation at the dunes. The plan would designate routes where off-road vehicles would be allowed and identify areas where they would be prohibited, among other things.

"We believe we can make it work," said Don Hicks, field manager for the BLM's Carson City district. "I think we can preserve that habitat, avoid listing and still have responsible recreation."

Richard Hilton of the Friends of Sand Mountain, a recreation group, said keeping off-road vehicles away from butterfly habitat may prove challenging but is doable. Listing of the butterfly can be avoided through the conservation strategy, he said.

"That's why we got involved. We don't want to see it listed," Hilton said.

Groups like the Center for Biological Diversity are determined to end all off-road vehicles activity at Sand Mountain, Hilton said.

But Patterson, who said his group was excluded from discussions resulting in the conservation plan, insists it won't go far enough.

"Without a listing, it's going to be difficult to actually get everybody at the table to recover the butterfly," Patterson said. "There is no way that agreement is going to prevent the extinction of the Sand Mountain blue butterfly."

Patterson denied that his group wants to end all off-road recreation at Sand Mountain but said none should be allowed in any area where Kearney buckwheat still exists.

Proceeding with a listing of the species is the only way it can be protected, he said.

"The only thing that really will do it are the laws of our country, which in this case is the Endangered Species Act," Patterson said. "The Endangered Species Act works."