



Debate: Are Ariz. owls a distinct subspecies?

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Research that suggested splitting pygmy owls in Southern Arizona, south Texas and Mexico into separate subspecies will be a key point at today's hearing on the future of the Arizona owls' endangered status.

Environmental groups and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will argue over whether the Arizona birds represent a significant portion of the entire range of pygmy owls and deserve protection as an endangered species. One issue is whether Arizona's owls are genetically different from those in Mexico.

Glenn Proudfoot, a veteran pygmy owl researcher, told the service in a written comment last fall that the pygmy owls in Southern Arizona and the Mexican states of Sonora and Sinaloa are genetically separate from those in other parts of Mexico, and that those in Arizona and northern Sonora appear to have been separated from those in Sinaloa for some time.

Given that, the birds in Arizona and Sonora should be managed distinctly from the others, he said. The delisting should be put on hold until authorities learn more about the distribution of the Arizona-Sonora populations, said Proudfoot, a research associate at Texas A&M University while doing that work. He now is a research associate at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

In their lawsuit last week, the Center for Biological Diversity and Defenders of Wildlife said the Fish and Wildlife Service ignored Proudfoot's work.

But the service argued the Arizona owls make up only a small part of the birds' range, which dips south to the Mexican states of Colima and Michoacan on the Pacific Coast and Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon on the Gulf of Mexico.

The service wrote in response to the lawsuit Friday that it considered the best available information, including Proudfoot's work, and determined there isn't enough evidence of a marked genetic difference between Arizona owls and those in Mexico and Texas.