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Mt. Graham fire reduces red squirrel population

By Mary Jo Pitzl
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The red squirrel population atop Mount Graham dropped 7 percent from spring, according to the latest survey of the endangered animal.

Biologists say the decline is not startling, given the wildfire that raced across the mountain this summer. But they caution it's too soon to detect a downward trend.

The annual fall survey found 264 squirrels, down from the 284 counted last spring, the Arizona Game and Fish Department said. Mount Graham is the only known location of the Mount Graham red squirrel.

Normally, the endangered-squirrel population increases between the spring and fall counts as squirrels are born and the young population starts to establish itself.

But the Nuttall Complex Fire, which burned more than 29,000 acres on the mountain from late June until mid-July, most likely took a toll, biologists said.

"It's not surprising, because we did expect to lose some squirrels to the fire," said Bill Van Pelt, non-game mammals program manager for Game and Fish.

But the bigger question, still unanswered, is whether escaping squirrels had enough time to establish new territory on the mountain and amass a food store to get

them through the winter, he said.

Robin Silver, a founder of the Center for Biological Diversity, said the squirrels' habitat is imperiled, not only because of the fire, but also because of the establishment of telescopes and support services on the mountain.

The biological center has been a vocal opponent of the growing astronomical center on Mount Graham.

The fact that the squirrel population has hovered below 300 for the last four years raises questions about whether the endangered species can ever get itself re-established, Silver said.

Fire is a natural phenomenon that squirrels have adapted to handle.

"But astronomers' vehicles running over them is not," Silver said.

Like Game and Fish officials, Silver said it's too early to draw any great significance from a drop of 20 squirrels over six months. But the fact remains that the squirrels' numbers are diminished, he said.

"You're looking at a conservative estimate of the number of Mount Graham red squirrels on Earth," he said. "That's when you start to realize how serious this is."

The fall count, done by state, federal and University of Arizona officials, could be off by 12 squirrels, researchers said.