

Endangered list may get more Keys species

By KEVIN WADLOW

October 05, 2011

The Florida Keys mole skink and the Lower Keys striped mud turtle may join the Key deer and Key Largo woodrat on the list of local wildlife species meriting federal protection.

Those reptiles and a handful of other animals and plants unique to the Keys are listed among 374 species newly approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for review as potential endangered-species candidates.

All of the species named in a Sept. 26 report are considered "rare southeastern aquatic, riparian and wetland animal and plant species," according to Fish and Wildlife.

The listing is a single step in a complex federal process that eventually may result in designation as a threatened or endangered species deserving protection. However, studies to determine that status could be several years away.

Noah Greenwald of the Center for Biological Diversity told the Association Press that the new list shows the Fish and Wildlife Service is making "substantial progress."

"This is what we were looking for -- starting to move species out of the pipeline into listing, and getting more species into the



This is a peninsula mole skink, similar to the Keys skink under consideration for the Endangered Species List.

pipeline to get them under consideration,"
Greenwald said.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the WildEarth Guardians group had sued Fish and Wildlife Service, charging the agency was failing to meet mandates laid out in the Endangered Species Act.

A settlement with the environmental groups requires Fish and Wildlife to proceed more quickly on many species, including the ones just listed as candidates.

Florida accounts for 27 of the plant and animal species on the new list, all of which face recognized threats from habitat loss, invasive exotics, rising sea levels, and other natural or manmade factors.

The Miami blue butterfly, which now apparently survives only in the Marquesas west of Key West, was a species frequently cited as deserving endangered-species review but had not been considered because of budget issues. The Miami blue is one of the Keys species in the new list.

Others include:

- A possible Lower Keys variation of the Eastern ribbonsnake.

The Eastern ribbonsnake is found throughout the state, but several reptile biologists contend the rare snakes in the Lower Keys have developed a unique color and scale pattern. The ribbonsnake is venomous, but not at levels considered deadly for humans.

- The Florida Keys mole skink, one of five acknowledged subspecies of the Florida mole skink.

"Reaching 6 inches in length, [the Keys skink] has a brown body, eight yellow stripes and a black-striped reddish tail," details one biological study. "It can sometimes be found under fallen fronds ... [and] in sandy areas, usually near the shoreline or in leaf litter."

The skinks can burrow through sand, and move very fast when exposed. They have been recorded from the Dry Tortugas to Key West. They were particularly populous on Lower Keys acreage owned by the U.S. Navy, one survey showed.

- A Lower Keys variation of the striped mud turtle, which grows to 4 inches long.

The mud turtle has a mostly brown shell is oval or elongated. The head is "relatively large, usually with a pair of narrow yellowish stripes on each side."

"Although filling of mosquito-control ditches has been proposed in conjunction with management of the Key deer, this would destroy some of the mud turtle's most important habitat," says one study.

- The Florida semaphore cactus, with natural colonies apparently confined to protected land on Little Torch Key and on Swan Key in Biscayne National Park.

Other colonies of "the erect, trunk-forming cactus endemic to the Florida Keys" were planted in local protected areas but the mortality was very high due to "root rot" and animal feeding. When mature at 3 to 10 feet, the cactus grows orange flowers and yellow fruit.

- The Big Pine partridge pea, a small yellow-flowering plant found in the pine rocklands of the Lower Keys, also was listed.