

2 groups sue over status of Arizona owls

by Ron Dungan - Aug. 26, 2012

Two groups have filed suit against the U.S. [Fish](#) and Wildlife Service, asking the agency to restore the status of the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl to an endangered species.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the Defenders of Wildlife filed the suit last week in U.S. District Court in [Tucson](#). They said that urban sprawl, loss of riparian habitat, invasive species, fire and drought have reduced Arizona's population of the owl to less than 50 birds.

"The primary reason is urban sprawl," said Noah Greenwald of the Center for Biological Diversity. Greenwald said that populations in Mexico may also be declining.

At issue is how critical the Arizona population is to the species as a whole, and whether it is a distinct species of pygmy owl.

The bird was once protected under the Endangered Species Act. In 2006, the Fish and [Wildlife](#) Service removed the Arizona population from the list of threatened and endangered wildlife.

The cactus ferruginous pygmy owl is a small, reddish-brown bird with a cream-colored belly streaked with reddish-brown, and a long tail. The eyes are yellow, the crown is lightly streaked and there are no ear tufts.

Paired black spots on the back of the head resemble eyes. Their diet includes lizards, birds, insects and small mammals. They are found in southern Arizona as well as Sonora and Sinaloa, Mexico.

The Fish and Wildlife Service declined to comment on the suit.

"We've just seen a copy of the suit, but we're not able to comment on pending litigation," said Jeff Humphrey, a spokesman for the agency