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US Fish & Wildlife grants endangered species status to horned lark and checkerspot butterfly



The streaked horned lark, left, and the Taylor's checkerspot butterfly. (David Maloney and Aaron Barna/USFWS)

By Stuart Tomlinson

Two Northwest species--a bird and a butterfly--were granted protection under the Endangered Species Act by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the Center for Biological Diversity said Wednesday.

Noah Greenwald, a spokesman for the national, nonprofit conservation organization, said the streaked horned lark and the Taylor's checkerspot butterfly are the latest additions to the list.

The designation comes as part settlement agreement reached with the center in 2011 that required USF&WS to speed protection for 757 species in the US.

“With today’s decision, these unique prairie species have a fighting chance,” said Greenwald, the center’s Portland-based endangered species director. “Very little of the original prairie grasslands that once graced the Puget Sound and Willamette Valley remain. To save the lark and the butterfly, we need to identify the last

remnants and protect them and restore other areas.”

Greenwald said both species remain in only a scattered handful of locations in the Willamette Valley and Columbia River Gorge, and in the existing prairie habitat around Fort Lewis, Wash., the Olympia, Wash. airport and the W.L. Finley National Wildlife Refuge south of Corvallis.

The federal agency designated 1,941 acres of habitat for the butterfly, and 4,629 acres in Washington and Oregon for the horned lark. Some of that habitat is in and around Portland International Airport, McNary Field in Salem and the Olympia Regional Airport.

That’s a substantial reduction from the critical habitat the center had hoped for, Greenwald said. USF&WS cut about 5,000 acres from the butterfly habitat area, and 7,500 acres from the horned lark’s proposed habitat area.

“The streaked horned lark and Taylor’s checkerspot butterfly are beautiful species that need our help to survive,” said Greenwald. “The Endangered Species Act has been more than 99 percent effective at saving species, but it needs to be utilized to its fullest extent if it is going to save these and other rare prairie species.

Under the 2011 agreement with the center, Greenwald said in a news release, 117 species have been protected and another 65 have been proposed for protection under the act

Species bios:

The streaked horned lark (*Eremophila alpestris strigata*) is a small, ground-dwelling songbird with conspicuous feather tufts, or “horns,”

on its head. Its back is heavily streaked with black, contrasting sharply with its ruddy nape and yellow underparts. Formerly a common nesting species in grasslands and prairies west of the Cascade Mountains from southern British Columbia through Washington and Oregon, it was so abundant around Puget Sound that it was considered a nuisance by turn-of-the-century golfers. The destruction of 98 percent of native grasslands on the West Coast, however, caused cataclysmic population declines. The lark is extirpated from the San Juan Islands, northern Puget Sound, Rogue Valley in Oregon, and Canada. In Washington it currently breeds at only 10 sites, including Grays Harbor, Fort Lewis, the Olympia airport and islands in the Lower Columbia River. In Oregon the larks breed in the Willamette Valley and lower Columbia River, including at the Portland, Salem, Corvallis, McMinnville and Eugene airports.

Taylor’s checkerspot butterfly (*Euphydryas editha taylori*) is a medium-sized, colorfully checkered butterfly with a wingspan of about 2 inches. It formerly occurred throughout the extensive grasslands, prairies and oak woodlands of Vancouver Island, the Puget Sound basin and the Willamette Valley. As this habitat has disappeared, so has Taylor’s checkerspot. The butterfly is currently known from just 11 sites in British Columbia, Washington and Oregon, including sites on the Olympic Peninsula, Puget Trough and Willamette Valley.