



ENDANGERED SPECIES

FWS proposing protections for fish and turtle species

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Sonoyta mud turtle. Photo courtesy of NPS.

An Arizona turtle and a Mississippi fish would gain federal protection under two new proposals from the Fish and Wildlife Service.

FWS will propose adding the two species to the Endangered Species Act list in tomorrow's Federal Register. The Sonoyta mud turtle has been on the agency's "candidate list" since 1997; the Pearl darter has hopped on and off the list since 1991, last becoming a candidate in 1999.

The Center for Biological Diversity petitioned the agency to list both species, which were part of the 2011 settlement that required FWS to consider listings for hundreds of candidate species.

FWS proposes to list the turtle as endangered and the fish as threatened.

The Sonoyta mud turtle faces habitat loss from groundwater withdrawals and long-term drought that could worsen with climate change. The Pearl darter, which once lived in the Pearl River, is threatened by oil and gas development, gravel mining, agriculture and other activities that pollute and destroy its habitat. The fish now survives only in the Pascagoula River basin in southeast Mississippi, according to CBD.

"Endangered Species Act protection is the best hope for saving this beautiful little fish from the very big threats it's facing," CBD senior scientist Tierra Curry said in a statement. "Spending 25 years on a waiting list allowed the fish to be wiped out from nearly two-thirds of its range, so it's a relief that it has finally been proposed for the protection it needs to survive."

FWS also announced today that it has rejected petitions from CBD to list nine other species: the angular dwarf crawfish, the Guadalupe murrelet, the Huachuca springsnail, two Kentucky cave beetles, northern wormwood, the Scripps's murrelet, the Virgin Islands coquí and the Washington ground squirrel.

FWS emphasized the decision to not list the Scripps's murrelet and Guadalupe murrelet,

two Pacific seabird species that it is removing from the candidate list because of “efforts of diverse stakeholders.”

Specifically, the National Park Service, Nature Conservancy, Navy’s Catalina Island Conservancy and Mexican government have worked to restore the bird’s habitat and remove invasive species, according to FWS. The birds breed on islands off the coast of Mexico and California and were threatened by rats, cats, dogs, sheep, cattle and other nonnative animals.

The birds spend most of their lives at sea, landing in caves, rock crevices and dense vegetation only to breed. FWS estimates there are between 4,000 and 6,600 Scripps’s murrelets of breeding age; that number for Guadalupe murrelets is between 1,200 and 4,900.

“It is encouraging to know populations of these resilient seabirds can rebound as land managers continue to work to restore balance to the island ecosystems where they breed,” Steve Henry, the FWS field supervisor in Ventura, Calif., said in a statement.