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Why these frogs are being reintroduced into the San Bernardino Mountains

By Jim Steinberg,
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SAN BERNARDINO MOUNTAINS >> More than 100 endangered mountain yellow-legged frogs have been reintroduced into the San Bernardino Mountains by a team of scientists from San Diego Zoo Global and the U.S. Geological Survey.

The release, at an elevation of 1,500 feet, is in a location where only a few of the rare yellow-legged frogs have been seen since the heavy rains in the winter following the 2003 Old fire, said Adam R. Backlin, an ecologist with the USGS in Santa Ana.

Pounding rains on the fire-denuded slopes near City Creek caused mudslides into the frog's habitat, killing many and taking away water refuge for survivors, Backlin said in a recent phone interview.

This species of frog spends more of its life in water than other native frog varieties, he said.



A mountain yellow-legged frog. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey Western Ecology Research Center in Santa Ana

More than 100 local mountain yellow-legged frogs (MYLF) will be making the San Bernardino Mountains their home after San Diego Zoo Global and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) reintroduced the large group into the mountainous habitat—increasing the wild population of an endangered species that, in some areas, is on the brink of being extirpated. This release is part of a 10-year captive breeding program that began when scientists from USGS rescued 80 tadpoles from a drying creek bed in the San Jacinto Mountains and brought them to the San Diego Zoo Institute for Conservation Research. Since then, thousands of frogs have been bred and released back into the region, with almost 1,200 released in 2016. The MYLF is just one of many amphibians in peril, and like others, it is essential for maintaining the natural balance of the ecosystem in which it lives

Anticipating significant habitat loss after that fire, a team of scientists collected yellow-legged frogs before the rains came, he said.

These recently released frogs, Backlin said, are descendants of those that are genetically distinct from other mountain yellow-legged frog populations in Southern California.

Surveys have shown a few yellow-legged frogs now live in this area, which indicates that the habitat has recovered.

The recovery of the frogs is important to many.

“Monitoring to see how they do will be very important, and it will give us new information about this species,” said Jenny Loda, a biologist and amphibian and reptile staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity in Oakland. “It is good they are working on a recovery of this frog in the San Bernardino Mountains.”

The program, which has introduced the species into the San Jacinto Mountains every year since 2010, was started by San Diego Zoo Global in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, USGS, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, San Bernardino National Forest and other zoological organizations.

Larger reintroductions are planned for higher elevation points in the San Bernardino Mountains between April and June, according to Backlin.

Over the past 40 years, this frog’s population has steadily declined from a variety of factors including habitat loss, drought, introduced predators, pollution and a fungus, according to information from the Center for Biological Diversity.