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Kitten-like Humboldt marten nearing extinction due to forest-clearing, illegal pot grows

By Annie Vainshtein

In the early 1900s, they lived comfortably in California's forests. Now, clustered into isolation and declining in great numbers, they face extinction.

Conservation groups are rallying to save the Humboldt marten, a furry, kitten-sized relative of minks and otters. Due to extensive forest clearing and trapping, and more recently, toxic pesticides from illegal marijuana cultivation — the Humboldt martens are down to a population of fewer than 200 in California.

A report Thursday from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife found listing the species as endangered would be warranted. In August, the state fish and game commission will make a final decision about the listing. Endangered status for the Humboldt martens would limit activities that lead to their deaths.

"Humboldt martens are three pounds of fur and attitude, but these feisty little predators need our help to have a fighting chance of survival," said Tierra Curry, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity. "It would be a shame if state wildlife officials let them go extinct."

In addition to the small population found in California, there are around 200 Humboldt martens struggling to stay alive in Oregon.

Historically, the Humboldt martens, which were first discovered in 1926, traveled freely from Sonoma up to the Columbia River. But now, due to factors including road construction and forest clearings, the martens are trapped in small pockets and severely limited in mobility, Curry said.

The mammals were actually thought to be extinct until they were spotted on national forest land in northwest California in 1996.

They weigh between one to three pounds, have big fluffy tails and spend most of their waking time hunting for Douglas squirrels and birds to fulfill their extremely high metabolisms. They also raid bees' and wasps' nests on occasion to get their paws on some honey ("always on the lookout for calories.")

When they're not eating, they're hiding in trees or dense shrubbery from larger mammals that lurk around in clear cuts, like bobcats, owls and coyotes.

But as forest clearing grows more pervasive, the Humboldt martens have fewer spaces to hide and move around in. They're stuck with two options: hide and starve — or cross and get eaten. The potential of becoming roadkill is also great for the Humboldt martens, as their habitats continue to close in on them to make way for roadways.

Their inability to migrate has also made it difficult for them to cope with Northern California's wildfires.

"The fires wouldn't have been a big problem historically (when there was more forest)," Curry said. "Now, there's so little habitat for them that when there's a big burn that takes out the stuff they need, it's a really big threat."

This also poses a major problem for their genetic diversity.

"Once a population is so small and there's no new inflow of genes, it becomes at risk for lack of genetic diversity," Curry said. "[Humboldt martens] are below the population size that is needed to be genetically robust."

Curry said the mammals' threat for extinction is comparable to the Fisher, one of their relatives, as well as the Sierra Nevada Red Fox.

The California Fish and Game Commission will decide on their endangered status on Aug 23. The meeting will be open to the public.