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# A butterfly's last stand: Federal listing sought for rare species in Sacramento Mountains

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A small butterfly once dwelled in large numbers throughout the meadows of the Sacramento Mountains in southern New Mexico.

It feasted on the nectar of the orange sneezewood at elevations as high as 2,750 feet above sea level around Cloudcroft.

But as climate change and development continued to grow in the area, conservationists worried the Sacramento Mountains checkerspot butterfly could one of the most endangered in the U.S.

The Center for Biological Diversity [filed a petition this week with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) seeking to list the butterfly as “endangered,” the highest protection possible under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The petition argued the butterfly had declined rapidly since the Service began formal surveys in 1999 and today was almost undetectable in its historic range which extends through Lincoln National Forest and the Capitan Mountains.

Like many indicator species, the decline of the butterfly could mean its habitat is shrinking and that forms of vegetation the checkerspot needs to survive are being lost.

“The sharp decline of the Sacramento Mountains checkerspot butterfly is alarming,” said Tara Cornelisse, entomologist at the Center. “We hope it’s not too late to save it.”

The Fish and Wildlife Service originally proposed to list the butterfly as endangered in 2001, and a conservation plan was released in 2004.

In 2008, the Service filed a 90-day finding that a listing might be warranted, but after a subsequent 12-month finding was completed in 2009, [the federal government decided a listing was not needed](#), citing a lack of data on its range and population.

“We are shocked by the Service’s refusal to grant protection to this butterfly, which is fluttering on the knife’s edge of extinction,” said Nicole Rosmarino of WildEarth Guardians upon the listing denial in 2009.

“This butterfly occurs on less than 2,000 acres and faces many threats within that small area, and yet the feds are continuing to ignore its plight.”

After filing the recent petition, Cornelisse blamed the butterfly’s continued decline on inadequate protection efforts by the federal government.

“Clearly the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s two-decade refusal to protect this pretty butterfly has contributed to its demise,” she said. “By reversing their own conclusions and ignoring this butterfly’s plight, the Fish and Wildlife Service has failed to protect this imperiled species.”

Threats to the butterfly were identified as livestock grazing and motorized recreation, per a report from the Center, along with invasive species, fire suppression and climate change.

To save the species, the Center argued its habitat must be preserved from such activities.

Cornelisse contended that by not protecting the butterfly, the federal government was putting the needs of industries that would be impacted by such conservation ahead of the environment.

“The Endangered Species Act works, but only if species are protected in the first place,” she said. “Too often the fear of political backlash influences the agency’s decisions and keeps it from doing its job to save species.”

## What is it?

The checkerspot grows to a wingspan of about two inches.

It is known for an elaborate pattern of white and orange, square-shaped spots or checkers on its back.

Checkerspots, like most specialist insects, are often highly selective of egg-laying sites and larval food sources, rarely surviving far from their host plants, per a report from the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The preferred host plant, a perennial forb or flowering plant, are abundant in their range.

The sneezewood, also a forb, is the preferred adult-feeding plant which flowers between mid-June and August.

A female butterfly two to three sets of eggs each year, and there is typically one generation annually, the report read.

They were first discovered in 1963, widely collected for their striking patterns.

Their range was defined in 2004 as an area within a 6-mile radius of Cloudcroft, but the butterfly was already found to be diminished in population.

“Within this area, the butterfly’s distribution is patchy and disjunct,” the report read.

In 1997 and 1998, observational data showed 595 adults and 114 larval tents – communal webs that contain larvae – and 1,629 adults were found in 1999.

In 2000, surveys found only 1,000 adults as the population appeared to dwindle.

## **How can it be protected?**

The Sacramento Mountains checkerspot butterfly receives no protection from the State of New Mexico, which does not recognize insects as wildlife, records show.

Otero County passed a protective ordinance in 2005, requiring the butterfly be considered in development plans that affect its known habitat.

That ordinance expired in 2011 and was not renewed.

The Center also argued the 2005 conservation plan, a voluntary mechanism, was proved inadequate as the species continued to decline after it was published, and it provided no specific funding sources or requirements.

A federal listing, the petition argued, could create stronger boundaries and regulations to protect the checkerspot and its habitat from continued destruction.

“A prompt decision to move forward with the listing of the butterfly with critical habitat is required to save the Sacramento Mountains checkerspot butterfly from extinction,” the petition read.

A coalition of environmental groups on Tuesday urged the federal government to increase funding for the Endangered Species Act, arguing hundreds of listed animals and plants receive just \$1,000 for recovery efforts and some get no funding at all.

[The 170 groups sent a letter to Congressional budget leaders](#) urging the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's endangered species budget be increased from \$291.7 million last year to \$592.1 million.

"The world is in the midst of a staggering wildlife extinction crisis," the letter read.

"Wildlife and plant populations are crashing around the world, with one million species facing extinction in the coming decades due to threats of habitat loss, climate change, wildlife exploitation, pollution, and other human activities."

Wildlife program director at WildEarth Guardians Lindsey Larris said the Endangered Species Act was powerless to protecting nature without adequate funding.

"Bedrock conservation laws like the Endangered Species Act are important, but without adequate funding and enforcement they are just words of intention on a piece of paper and that doesn't help species," Larris said.

"Fact is, the ESA has been chronically underfunded for decades and that must change immediately."