

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FEATURE RELEASE

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THE TEN MOST ENDANGERED SPECIES IN NORTH AMERICA

Think of North America as an old luxury hotel that--because of ignorance, bad luck and mismanagement--has grown rather shabby and is not capable of caring for its guests as in times past. The kitchen doesn't produce a full menu anymore. Some of the plumbing is unreliable and the air has become foul in several parts. Many of the rooms have been damaged by fires, floods, or are being altered for other purposes.

Conditions are so bad, in fact, that 221 of the guests are threatening to check out and never come back.

The latter, of course, are North America's endangered animals and plants. They represent most of the major forms of life including mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, insects, and even plants.

Recovery teams of biologists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, all 50 State conservation departments, universities, and private agencies are working together to save these species. It is the duty of each recovery team to study its assigned species, to learn why these animals or plants are failing, and to devise ways of improving their living conditions. This includes finding the places they depend on for survival--their "critical habitats."

For a number of them, however, the teams' efforts may not be enough. Several species are having trouble finding mates. One can't find any mate. And another is finding the wrong kind of mate. Some may soon lose their habitats; some already have and are being moved to new locations or kept in captivity. For others, the reasons for failure are less obvious.

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From all these, several have been chosen for the dubious honor of being the 10 most endangered species in North America. It might be well, as we enter the 1980's, to watch these creatures and see how many survive the decade.

The most endangered mammal, the black-footed ferret, probably never was numerous. Not much is known of this large, night-prowling weasel's past, except that it lived on the plains wherever its prime source of food, the prairie dog, was available. Its future, as is true of most animals that rely on only one food source, is uncertain. In this case prairie dogs were shot, poisoned, drowned, and trapped out of much of their range to make room for farming.

In the last 5 years, few positive sightings of black-footed ferrets have been made in the wild. There are none of these ferrets in captivity.

The red wolf is a close second among the mammals nearest to extinction. Once roving throughout the South, this smaller cousin of the gray wolf made its last stand in a corner of wilderness in the remote coastal marshes of Texas and Louisiana. But even there it was harassed, and with the settlement of the land, the domestic dog and eventually the coyote moved in. The dog brought disease. The coyote did even more damage by crossbreeding with the red wolf until hardly a purebred specimen remains in the wild today.

Fortunately, the recovery team captured a dozen or so purebreds and is breeding them in captivity until a suitable release site can be found for the red wolves in the wild.

The most endangered fish is also the most famous one, the snail darter. Drab, nobby-headed, spiny-backed, and only 3 inches long, it lived for ages in total obscurity in the bright shoals of a fast-running stretch of the Little Tennessee River. There it spawned, and there it fed on small aquatic snails and insects. Had there, but for its discovery in 1973, it would also have passed into oblivion along with its habitat under the slack waters of the massive Tellico Dam, which was then nearing completion.

Ironically, perhaps, 1973 was also the year the Endangered Species Act became law. With its stipulations protecting not only living individuals but their habitats as well, it was inevitable that the huge Tellico Dam and the tiny fish would have their day in court. It is not likely the snail darter will adapt to the new quarters the recovery team has selected for it in nearby rivers.

The birdwing pearly mussel, a drab, two-inch, freshwater clam, is probably the most endangered mollusk. Except for the deeply grooved margins on its shell, and its beautiful name, it is much like others of its kind. Having lived in the clean, free-flowing tributaries of the upper Tennessee River, however, it was unable to adapt to both the deep waters created by dam construction, and the acid pollution caused by coal mining. Its last-chance resort is a tiny section of the Duck River near Paducah, Tennessee.

The most endangered insect, the lotis blue butterfly, lives in a few narrow peat bogs under a power transmission line near Mendocino, California. Though in times past butterflies occupied a wider range, this is their only remaining habitat. Very few of the small, violet-blue butterflies manage to perpetuate themselves each year. In 1979, only 2 lotis blue butterflies were seen. Almost any disturbance of their habitat, construction, drainage, or a long drought could bring about their extinction.

The most endangered bird--and possibly the most endangered of all 10 of these species--is the dusky seaside sparrow which lives on or adjacent to St. Johns National Wildlife Refuge near Cape Canaveral, Florida. One of the demands of this shy and reclusive bird is an open vista. It wants no buildings, trees, or brush blocking its view of the horizon. Further, its aversion to crossing such barriers as treelines, rivers, and highways, seems to prevent it from moving into better living space, even when its habitat is being destroyed by fires or changing water levels--a major factor in the bird's decline.

In recent years only a dozen or so birds have been counted. None were positively identified as females. It is, in fact, unknown if females exist. No nesting activities have been observed since 1976.

The next most endangered bird is probably the Kaula oo (KOW-ah-oo oh oh), a native of the Hawaiian Island of the same name. Sparrow-sized, brown, and otherwise nondescript, it has golden-yellow leg feathers which in times past were used to decorate the ceremonial gowns of tribal chieftains. The reason for its near extinction, however, was loss of habitat to commercial development of the land and possibly the introduction of foreign diseases. Feeding on insects and berries, and nesting in hollow trees, it was last known to be living in the high, forested canyons of Mount Kawaikini. There may be no more than a pair or two left.

The Houston toad , the continent's most endangered amphibian, lives in widely scattered bits of open woods in southeastern Texas. The sandy loam of its habitat doesn't hold water long, so it is at the mercy of the spring rains which must come frequently to keep the breeding ponds full until the eggs hatch. But its real enemy is destruction and fragmentation of its habitat. With each new housing subdivision in the area, the toad loses living space and becomes ever more distant from others of its kind. The male's chances of calling a female to his mating pond are greatly reduced. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has designated areas in two counties as critical habitat for the estimated 1,500 toads that remain.

The Kemps Ridley sea turtle was selected for the most endangered reptile. Paving the Caribbean, the Gulf, and the Atlantic, the one nesting place for the species was a long-kept secret from all except a few rural Mexicans. Then, one fateful day in 1947, a newsreel photographer not only discovered its nesting area on a beach 250 miles south of Brownsville, Texas, but also a clue to the secret that kept the place so well hidden.

Literally, the secret was in the wind. Biologists believe the gravid females wait for wind to erase their tracks from the sand. Thus, according to their instincts, they waited off shore as they had for thousands of years for a wind storm.

The strong winds came as promised, and the females laid their eggs and returned to the sea. The wind covered all signs of the drama as in the past. But this time it was recorded on 16mm, color film.

Though the Mexican Federal Government protects those that are left from predators and shrimpers, not more than 300 females come ashore to nest these days. Only on fading film emulsion will 40,000 giant sea turtles ever swarm up the lonely beach with their burdens of life, again.

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Finally, the tenth member of the continent's most endangered species is the clay-loving phacelia. This plant's needs and stresses are surprisingly similar to the other endangered life forms. Like the small darter and the birdwing pearl mussel, it lives in only one place. Like the lotis blue butterfly, that place is in a privately-owned right-of-way. Like the Houston toad, construction has destroyed much of its habitat. And like the Kauai oo, there are only a few left.

A hundred years ago, the Denver Rio Grande and Western Railroad was unknowingly laid down right through the small area where these plants lived in Utah County, Utah. Those that were left were first discovered and identified by a botanist in 1883. Ninety years later these violet-blue wild flowers still bloom in the sun along the railroad tracks. But now there are only four individual plants left.

Sheer numbers alone is not the sole criterion for determining how endangered a species is. Several factors contribute to this status including the ability of a population to reproduce itself, threats to the population or its habitat, availability of food supplies and the degree to which the species responds to conservation measures.

As noted, some of these endangered species are well known and have already touched the lives of Americans. Others are so small and obscure that they could check out any time and few of us would have known they ever lived there at all. But together they are a very select group. Like rich crusty aristocrats, they expect the same posh services they received when their hotel was new eons ago.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Photos are available upon request by calling the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at 202/543-5770.

