

Newest marsh villain: the periwinkle snail

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Oil companies, levees and the burrowing nutria have been blamed for destroying Louisiana's marshes -- and now a new culprit arrives: the periwinkle snail.

The marble-sized snail has been blamed by researchers from Brown and Louisiana State universities for leaving thousands of Gulf of Mexico and eastern U.S. coastal marshes bare mud flats that had been thriving wetlands, the New Orleans Times-Picayune reported Monday.

And since marshes protect land against hurricanes, the loss had affected many areas struck by this year's record number of hurricanes.

Brian Silliman, a former Brown researcher and lead author of a study on the snails published in this week's issue of the journal Science, says the snails killed as much as 11 percent of the estimated 100,000 acres of marsh lost in Louisiana during the 2000-01 droughts.

However, Mark Schexnayder, a Louisiana Sea Grant program scientist, told the Times-Picayune: "Obviously (the snails) exist and are part of the web. But I'm not dropping the fight against the main causes of the erosion to take on a snail."

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