

Arizona's bald eagles may lose endangered status

February 26 2010, By John Faherty

The desert-nesting bald eagles of central Arizona are the only bald eagles in the United States still receiving protection as members of the endangered-species list.

That protection may soon end. A motion filed in U.S. District Court on Wednesday by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service asked the court to end the temporary protection it has imposed for nearly two years.

Environmentalists had argued in court that the Arizona eagles are a "distinct population segment," meaning they deserve special protection.

But federal officials, after a yearlong study ordered by the court, concluded the bald eagles in Arizona are merely a "discrete population segment," meaning they are pretty much just another group of bald eagles that happen to live there.

This matter of semantics could have significant consequences for the [birds](#), which are found south of the Mogollon Rim and north of the Arizona/Mexico border.

Fish and Wildlife says there are 204 desert-nesting bald eagles in the state, including 48 breeding pairs.

In July 2007, eagles in the contiguous 48 states were removed from the federal protection list because, after decades of conservation efforts, the bald eagle was beginning to thrive.

The Center for Biological Diversity, based in Tucson, and the Maricopa Audubon Society filed a petition in federal court arguing that the desert-nesting bald eagle, sometimes called the bald eagle of the Sonoran Desert, should still be protected.

The birds, they argued, are smaller and lighter than other bald eagles. They are also the only ones to live in extreme heat. Supporters of keeping them on the list also say the birds are biologically distinct.

The birds, Fish and Wildlife says, do not have any "biologically distinguishing factors important to the species as a whole."

Fish and Wildlife is confident the birds would survive a delisting.

"Well, we certainly hope so. We think it would," said Tom Buckley, an agency spokesman.

The agency points out that the birds would continue to receive protections under the Bald and Gold Eagle Protection Act and other federal and state statutes.

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