

'BioBlitz' scientists to survey California desert valley

April 6 2017, by Christopher Weber



This May 6, 2009, photo provided by the Nature Conservancy shows scientist Maurice Hall on the Amargosa River in Death Valley National Park, Calif. Scientists will fan out across a California desert valley to take an inventory of everything that lives there, including birds, bats, toads, crickets, coyotes and native plants. (Bill Christian/The Nature Conservancy via AP)

Scientists will fan out across a California desert valley this weekend to

take an inventory of everything there that flies, hops, runs, swims or grows in the dirt.

It's been 45 years since researchers last scoured Amargosa Valley near the northern edge of the Mojave Desert. That accounting of species led to federal protections within the remote region and new scientific understanding of its biodiversity.

Over three days, experts in a variety of fields will once again tally birds, bats, toads, crickets, coyotes, lichen and native plants, said Sophie Parker, a senior scientist with the Nature Conservancy.

"We're revisiting this area to determine how it has changed over the past several decades," said Parker, who's organizing the "Bio-Blitz" with officials from the federal Bureau of Land Management.

Researchers have kept a regular count of hundreds of bird species, two species of desert fish and a tiny endangered rodent called the Amargosa vole, she said.

But the status of many other living things in the valley remains a mystery that some three dozen scientists hope to shed light on starting Friday.

Entomologists will tote nets while on the lookout for certain flies, beetles, crickets and grasshoppers.

Botanists will search for two rare plants that may have emerged from dormancy following heavy winter rains that prompted rare desert blooms elsewhere in California.

And mammologists will track footprints and scat in the hopes of spotting bobcats, mountain lions, coyotes, rabbits and kit foxes.

The valley stretches into Nevada but the Bio-Blitz will focus on a 26-mile section along the Amargosa River on the California side, east of Death Valley.

Parker said she looks forward to hearing her colleagues' shouts of excitement echo over the landscape as they make discoveries.

"Since we don't have a full and complete understanding of the area, it can be really gratifying when we're able to do this kind of detailed work," she said.

Since the 1972 survey, the Nature Conservancy has worked with the [land management](#) bureau to protect the biodiversity within the Amargosa River Watershed—employing scientific study and land acquisition and restoration.

The weekend's base camp will be at a date farm that sits along a creek that feeds into the river, where herpetologists are hopeful they'll find the endangered Amargosa toad hopping around.

Bats have been seen near the farm and researchers will use echolocation to determine where they forage and roost.

"The river has cliffs and canyons and caves along it where there may be bats," Parker said Wednesday. "This would definitely be adding knowledge, to get an understanding of exactly where they are."

Parker, a soil ecologist, plans to spend most of her time on hands and knees, digging for what she calls a "living crust" of lichens, mosses and bacteria common along certain riverbanks.

"It's a very small-scale ecosystem, and that's what gets me individually excited," she said. "But it's the collective effort that this whole thing is

all about."

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