Beetle reintroduction paying off in southwest Missouri

November 19 2016, by Jim Salter

A colorful beetle that was once common in southwest Missouri is showing signs of a comeback, thanks to a joint effort by the St. Louis Zoo and conservation organizations.

The zoo said 850 American burying beetles, which disappeared in the state in the 1970s, have been found in traps it placed—eight times as many as were found in 2015.

The zoo, Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Missouri Department of Conservation have collaborated since 2012 to breed the beetles at the zoo and periodically reintroduced at Wah'Kon-Tah Prairie, which is about 80 miles northwest of Springfield.

Bob Merz, who directs the zoo's Wildcare Institute Center for Conservation of the American Burying Beetle, said he was "thrilled" by the latest census.

"We believe with adequate research on what has caused this animal to disappear the species may again thrive in Missouri, and the surveys for the beetles have offered very positive signs for their future survival," Merz said in a statement.

The beetle was once found in 35 U.S. states and southern Canada. By 1989, only one population was known, in Rhode Island, and it became the first insect designated as a federally endangered species. Since then, additional populations have been found in Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma,

South Dakota, Nebraska and Arkansas.

Experts don't know what precipitated the beetle's decline, but scientists speculate it may have been due to pesticides, habitat loss and destruction, or competition by other scavengers of dead animals.

The only Missouri population is the one reintroduced at Wah'Kon-Tah.

Researchers this year found 377 beetles in Missouri that had been notched on their hard wing covers, which distinguishes captive-bred from wild beetles. The zoo said 473 un-notched beetles were found—offspring of reintroduced beetles.

"We have moved from finding only a handful of beetles in the early years to finding 110 last year and now 850 in 2016," Merz said.

The beetle is up to an inch-and-a-half long, with a shiny black body and orange-red markings. Experts say it is useful for helping to remove dead and decaying animals naturally.

Merz said the earlier decline of the beetle provides "warning to us that something harmful is happening in our shared ecosystem."

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