

Squirrels, bees could get US aid but not Yellowstone's bison

September 5 2019, by Matthew Brown



In this Feb. 12, 2011 file photo a bison from Yellowstone National Park walks through the snow shortly before being shot and killed during a hunt by members of an American Indian tribe, near Gardiner, Mont. U.S. officials have rejected a petition to protect the park's roughly 4,500 bison, which are routinely hunted and sent to slaughter to guard against the spread of disease to cattle. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, File)

U.S. wildlife officials rejected petitions Thursday to protect Yellowstone National Park's storied bison herds but pledged to consider protections for two other species—a tiny, endangered squirrel in Arizona and bees that pollinate rare desert flowers in Nevada.

Wildlife advocates have campaigned for decades to halt the routine slaughter of bison migrating out of Yellowstone to reach their winter grazing grounds in Montana.

The burly animals, also known as buffalo, once numbered in the tens of millions before overhunting reduced them to just a few small herds.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service rebuffed calls for special protections for Yellowstone bison in 2015 but was forced to reconsider under a U.S. District Court order issued last year.

The finding Thursday did not give any reasons for the latest rejection. Federal officials have previously said the animals are resilient enough and Yellowstone's herds large enough to be in no immediate danger of extinction.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Ivan Vicente referred questions to a regional representative of the agency in Denver who did not immediately respond for comment.

Regarding the Mount Graham red squirrel of western Arizona, officials agreed to consider whether more habitat protections are needed. Weighing a mere 8 ounces, the squirrels are found solely in the Pinaleno Mountains of western Arizona.

Fires, roads and developments including a University of Arizona telescope complex have shrunk the squirrel's range. An estimated 75 remain in the wild.

Wildlife advocates contend the squirrels' only hope is the removal of the telescopes, some nearby recreational cabins and a bible camp in the area.

"It's an incredibly precarious situation," said Robin Silver of the Center for Biological Diversity, which sued government officials last year to force a decision on the group's 2017 petition for more habitat protections. "If you want to try to have these animals survive you have to remove those structures."

In Nevada, officials said the Mojave poppy bee faces potential threats from grazing, gypsum mining, recreation and competition from honeybees. Its survival is closely linked to two rare desert poppy flowers in the Mojave Desert.

Federal law allows citizens to petition for plants and animals to get protections under the Endangered Species Act.

The positive finding on the petitions for the poppy bee and red squirrel means officials will conduct more intensive reviews before issuing final decisions on the two species.

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