



News Release

Southwest Region P.O. Box 1306 Albuquerque, NM 87103

For Release: Immediate

Contact: Mike Wrigley (602) 242-0210
Elizabeth Slown (505) 248-6909

RESEARCHERS FIND PYGMY-OWL POPULATIONS SOUTH OF THE BORDER

The first results of a two-year U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) funded survey of cactus ferruginous pygmy-owls located approximately 280 pygmy-owls in the Mexican state of Sonora which abuts Arizona. Previously, the pygmy-owl was considered rare or absent in Mexico within 150 miles of the U.S. border.

“These data indicate that pygmy-owls are indeed in northern Sonora, which is good news for the recovery of the owl in Arizona,” said Nancy Kaufman, Director of the Service’s Southwest Region.

“The Arizona population of pygmy owls is endangered. Having owls just south of Arizona provides for greater opportunities of natural movement across the border. Survival of the endangered Arizona population may be helped by owl movements north,” concluded Kaufman.

The cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl was listed under the Endangered Species Act as a distinct population segment in 1997. Because the owl is listed only in Arizona, owls found in Mexico, although important in developing a recovery strategy, will not affect their endangered status in Arizona.

The research, conducted by University of Arizona Assistant Professor Dr. Robert J. Steidle and graduate researcher Aaron Flesch, is to survey owl populations and conduct habitat assessments. The

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project began in 2000 with habitat assessments in Sonora, particularly along the border region.

Approximately 200 transects were surveyed in a variety of vegetation types and topographic formations, including valley bottoms, lower bajada, upper bajada, mountains and canyons. Surveys and habitat studies will continue in 2001, with a final report expected late 2001.

A team, composed of State, Federal, and Tribal biologists and land managers as well as academic, county, local industry and environmental representatives, is developing a strategy to recover the pygmy-owl in Arizona. Possible steps to improve owl numbers and distribution in Arizona are being suggested - such as habitat identification and protection, captive breeding, facilitated dispersal, and double clutching. (Double clutching is the removal of eggs from a bird's nest early in the breeding season. This encourages the bird to lay and care for a second batch/clutch while the first clutch is mechanically incubated or hatched and reared by surrogate parents.) At this time, the recovery team and the Service are not recommending specific use of these tools until research indicates they are necessary and will contribute to the recovery of the owl in Arizona.

A draft recovery plan will be available for public comment later this spring.

The cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl is a small reddish-brown bird less than seven inches tall that feeds on birds, lizards, insects and small mammals. Learn more about the pygmy-owl at the Service's Ecological Services website, <http://arizonaes.fws.gov>.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 530 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

[<http://southwest.fws.gov>](http://southwest.fws.gov)