

News Release



For immediate release
Aug. 25, 2008

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West Virginia northern flying squirrel has recovered

Glides off endangered list

Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne announced today that the West Virginia northern flying squirrel has recovered from the brink of extinction and will be removed from Endangered Species Act protection. The species' rebound can be attributed to a combination of conservation efforts and regeneration of the flying squirrel's forest habitat.

The U.S. Forest Service, through its management of the Monongahela National Forest and George Washington National Forest, played a major role in protecting the forest ecosystem critical to the squirrel's survival. In addition, the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources and U.S. Forest Service Northern Research Station conducted studies that provided the scientific foundation for delisting the squirrel. The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries also assisted in monitoring the squirrel.

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“Based on data from more than 20 years of monitoring the squirrel’s presence in the forest, as well as the completion of extensive habitat analysis, our scientists are confident that the squirrel has recovered to the point where it no longer requires federal protection.” Kempthorne said.

The West Virginia northern flying squirrel, formerly known as the Virginia northern flying squirrel, depends upon the forest ecosystem in the Allegheny highlands of West Virginia and Virginia.

In 1985, when the species was first protected as endangered, only 10 flying squirrels in four separate areas were located. Biologists determined that habitat loss, human disturbance and competition with the more common southern flying squirrel threatened the existence of the species.

Since that time, threats have been eliminated or largely minimized, and the squirrel distribution has grown dramatically. By the end of 2006, biologists had captured more than 1,200 squirrels at 109 sites throughout much of its historic range.

The Service received 18 substantive comments on the proposal to remove the flying squirrel from the federal list of threatened and endangered species in December 2006, which prompted biologists to conduct additional analysis. The analysis reinforced previous conclusions that the species had recovered to acceptable levels to warrant delisting.

In October 2007, the Service published a draft plan for monitoring the flying squirrel after it is delisted. The final plan, other information about the squirrel and links to all the pertinent documents are available at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/wvnfsq.html>.

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The Service, along with state and other agencies and organizations, will monitor the status of the flying squirrel for another 10 years – double the five years required by the Act. The lengthier monitoring timeframe will provide a more robust indication of habitat availability and persistence of the squirrel.

Since 1973, when the Endangered Species Act became law, 20 species have recovered to the point where they could be removed from the lists of endangered and threatened wildlife and plants, including, in 2007, the Yellowstone grizzly bear, the bald eagle in the lower 48 states, and the Minnesota and western Great Lakes populations of gray wolves.

The final rule announcing the decision to remove federal protection for the West Virginia northern flying squirrel will be published in tomorrow's Federal Register. It is available now at http://federalregister.gov/OFRUpload/OFRData/2008-19607_PI.pdf. The action will take effect 30 days from tomorrow.

Information about the Service's endangered species program may be found at <http://www.fws.gov/endangered>.

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