



Poweshiek Skipperling

Oarisma poweshiek

The Poweshiek skipperling has been proposed for listing as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Endangered species are animals and plants that are in danger of becoming extinct. Identifying, protecting, and restoring endangered species is a primary objective of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's endangered species program.

What is the Poweshiek Skipperling?

Appearance: The Poweshiek skipperling is a small butterfly with a wing-span of about 1 inch. It is dark brown above with some light orange along the wing margins and a lighter orange head. The underside of the wings, which can be seen when it's at rest, are dark to light brown with very prominent white veins that may make the wing look striped.

Habitat: Poweshiek skipperlings live in tallgrass prairie in both high, dry areas as well as low, moist areas. In Michigan they are found mainly in prairie fens, a type of wet prairie.

Reproduction: Poweshiek skipperling larvae (caterpillars) hibernate over winter on the ground; they emerge in spring and early summer to continue developing until they pupate and emerge as adult butterflies. Adults have a short lifespan of only one to two weeks and can be seen between mid-June and mid-July. During that time they mate and lay eggs. Larvae hatch during late summer; they feed and develop through early fall and then overwinter to continue development the following spring.

Feeding Habits: Adult butterflies feed on nectar from prairie flowers such as purple coneflower (*Echinacea angustifolia*), blackeyed susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), and palespike lobelia (*Lobelia spicata*). Because of the limited amount of research that has been done on the Poweshiek, we are not certain which plant species are necessary for the larvae to develop although we know they select native, fine-stemmed grasses and sedges such as little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) and slender spike rush (*Eleocharis elliptica*).



Photo by Dave Cuthrell, Michigan Natural Features Inventory

What is the Poweshiek Skipperling?

(Continued)

Range: Historically, Poweshiek skipperlings were found in tallgrass prairie and prairie fens from Manitoba to Iowa, with populations also found in Michigan and Wisconsin. Unfortunately, the range is now much less and has been declining for some time. The Poweshiek may have been extirpated from the Dakotas, Minnesota and Iowa within the last 10 years – an area that, until recently, had the vast majority of the surviving populations. It is now known only from Wisconsin, Michigan and Manitoba.

Why is the Poweshiek Skipperling a Proposed Endangered Species?

Habitat Loss and Habitat Fragmentation: Only about 4 percent of the original tallgrass prairie in the United States remains. Much of what is left is in small, isolated sites, so the butterfly cannot move from site to site. If the Poweshiek skipperling is lost at a site, there are often no nearby populations to recolonize.

Habitat Management: In addition to the loss of large blocks of contiguous prairie, the prairie that remains is often not managed in a way that can support Poweshiek skipperlings. Historically, wildfire helped maintain the treeless nature of prairies. Today, grazing and prescribed burns replicate that effect. However, grazing or burning that is too intense or too frequent may not create conditions suitable for the Poweshiek or may kill too many of the butterflies to sustain the population.

What Is Being Done to Conserve the Poweshiek skipperling?

Listing: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed that the Poweshiek skipperling be listed and protected under the Endangered Species Act. Listing as endangered would help focus attention and funds on species and the habitat that it needs to survive.

Research: We have limited information on the Poweshiek skipperling's life history and exact habitat requirements. Research is needed to determine land management regimes that will help this butterfly survive and provide information that may allow us to reintroduce it into formerly occupied habitats. A study is ongoing to understand the genetic diversity of surviving populations. This information will help us determine whether management is needed to increase diversity of remaining populations and will help ensure that any captive propagation will result in genetically robust populations.

Habitat Protection: Where possible, high quality prairie and prairie fens need to be protected and appropriately managed. This may be on lands that are already publicly owned and through easements and financial incentives on private lands. In light of the species' highly endangered status, its conservation in the wild may only be secured by placing a high priority on conserving remaining populations. Attempts are being made to develop methods to propagate the species in captivity, but it seems clear that it will be an unusually difficult to keep in captivity. Therefore, conservation of remaining populations is extremely important.

What Can I Do to Help Prevent the Extinction of Species?

Spread the Word: Learn more about the Poweshiek skipperling and other rare and declining species. Understand how the destruction of habitat leads to loss our nation's plant and animal diversity. Tell others about what you have learned.

Join : Join a conservation group; many have local chapters or volunteer at a local nature, zoo, or National Wildlife Refuge.

Native plants: Provide habitat for butterflies by planting native vegetation in your yard. Avoid using invasive non-native plants like purple loosestrife and dame's rocket and remove invasive non-natives, like buckthorn and honeysuckle if they invade your yard.

Minimize: Use as little herbicide, insecticide and fertilizer as possible or avoid pesticides and insecticides entirely. Pesticides may harm butterflies and other pollinators you want to attract and, along with fertilizers, can harm water quality.