



## U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service

### Nevada Fish and Wildlife Office

*Conserving the Biological Diversity of the Great Basin, Eastern Sierra, and Mojave Desert*

## Service Designates Critical Habitat for Endangered Mount Charleston blue butterfly

### Questions and Answers

June 29, 2015

#### **What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announcing regarding the endangered Mount Charleston blue butterfly?**

The Service is designating critical habitat for the endangered Mount Charleston blue butterfly. The subspecies is in danger of extinction and has been protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) since October 2013. The Service is now moving to protect the butterfly's habitat — approximately 5,214 acres in the Spring Mountains. The land comprising the critical habitat is 99 percent federally owned and mostly within designated wilderness. The final critical habitat rule will become effective on July 30, 2015.

#### **What does the term “critical habitat” mean?**

Critical habitat is defined in Section 3 of the ESA as:

- The specific areas within the geographical area occupied by the species, at the time it is listed, on which are found those physical or biological features
  - Essential to the conservation of the species, and
  - Which may require special management considerations or protection; and
  - Specific areas outside the geographical area occupied by the species at the time it is listed, upon a determination that such areas are essential for the conservation of the species.

#### **Where does the Mount Charleston blue butterfly live?**

The Mount Charleston blue butterfly is known only to occur at the high elevations of the Spring Mountains (approximately 8,200 – 11,500 feet above sea level), in the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, approximately 25 miles northwest of Las Vegas in Clark County, Nevada. The butterfly requires open forest habitats that support its larval host and nectar plants, Torrey's milkvetch (*Astragalus calycosus* var. *calycosus*), mountain oxytrophe (*Oxytropis oreophila* var. *oreophila*), and broad keeled milkvetch (*Astragalus platytropis*).



Mount Charleston blue butterfly

Corey Kallstrom/USFWS

## **Will the designation of critical habitat stop expansion of the ski area?**

The Service is committed to working with the Forest Service and the Las Vegas Ski and Snowboard Resort (LVSSR) to implement conservation efforts that protect the Mount Charleston blue butterfly, while also allowing for reasonable expansion and development of the LVSSR compatible with the Mount Charleston blue butterfly, including skiing and snowboarding in the winter and mountain biking and hiking in the summer. The Mount Charleston blue butterfly can coexist with managed recreation when such recreational activities are properly sited, and operation and maintenance of the infrastructure needed to support these activities is appropriately managed. The Mount Charleston blue butterfly historically occurred and currently exists on active ski runs within the LVSSR.

## **What is the Mount Charleston blue butterfly?**

The Mount Charleston blue butterfly (*Icaricia (Plebejus) shasta charlestonensis*) is a distinct subspecies of the wider ranging Shasta blue butterfly (*Icaricia (Plebejus) shasta*), a member of the family Lycaenidae. The wingspan of the Mount Charleston blue ranges from  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1 inch. The wings of the males are dark to dull iridescent blue and females' wings are brown with a blue overlay. The undersides of their wings are gray, with a pattern of black spots, brown blotches and pale wing veins to give it a mottled appearance.

## **Has the population of Mount Charleston Blue butterfly declined?**

Yes. Based on monitoring surveys, the petition seeking ESA protection for the subspecies, and discussions with Mount Charleston blue butterfly experts, it appears the population has been declining since 1995. Based on the best available information, the Service determined these declines in distribution and abundance are a result of natural and human-caused factors. Currently, the butterfly is known to occupy only three of its 17 historical locations, while it is presumed the butterfly occupies another eight of those historical locations. The butterfly is assumed extirpated from the remaining six locations, which means none have been seen in those areas in 20 years or more. A location is presumed occupied when there are sightings of the butterfly and, therefore, there is a potential for diapausing larvae to exist. Diapause is a period of suspended growth or development similar to hibernation.

## **What are the main threats to the Mount Charleston blue butterfly?**

Threats contributing to the Mount Charleston blue butterfly's decline include the loss and degradation of habitat due to changes in natural fire regimes and succession, implementation of recreation development projects, increases in nonnative plants, and extreme precipitation events and drought, which are likely to become more frequent under climate change.

Collection of the butterfly was also considered a threat at the time of listing. In order to help minimize this threat, the Service worked cooperatively with the U.S. Forest Service to develop and issue a [closure order](#) that prohibits possessing, storing, or transporting Mount Charleston blue butterflies and other blue butterfly species without a permit.

## **If the U.S. Forest Service prohibits possession, storing, and transporting the Mount Charleston blue butterfly through a closure order, why does the Service find it necessary to designate critical habitat for the subspecies?**

The U.S. Forest Service's closure order only pertains to butterfly collection activities in specific areas ([www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5432874.pdf](http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5432874.pdf)). It prohibits possessing, storing or transporting Mount Charleston blue butterflies and other blue butterfly species without a permit. It does not address continued threats from other natural and human-caused factors.

Designating critical habitat offers additional potential benefits for the butterfly that include: (1) a heightened awareness by the public and governments (federal, state, county, or local) that promotes education, planning, or activities that promote conservation and reduce negative impacts leading to recovery of the butterfly; (2) conservation activities that are focused on the most essential features and areas; and (3) measures that prevent people from causing inadvertent harm to the species.

**Where can the public obtain the documents associated with the designated critical habitat for the Mount Charleston blue butterfly?**

The documents are available on the Internet at [www.regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov) (FWS–R8–ES–2013–0105) and at [www.fws.gov/nevada/](http://www.fws.gov/nevada/). Supporting documents used in preparing the critical habitat rule are available for inspection, by appointment, during normal business hours at the Southern Nevada Fish and Wildlife Office in Las Vegas at 4701 North Torrey Pines Drive, telephone 702-515-5230, facsimile 702-515-5231.

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