

News Release



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Pilot Breeding Program of Mount Graham Red Squirrels Officially Underway

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) scientists, along with state wildlife agency and U.S. Forest Service partners, have been coordinating with the Phoenix Zoo to develop a pilot breeding program for the critically endangered Mount Graham red squirrel (MGRS). Phoenix Zoo will act as the coordinator for other zoos interested in participating in this important program. Recently, biologists with the Service collected three females and one male from the wild to bring the Zoo population to six individuals (three males, three females) needed for this project.

The three pairs of red squirrels establish the base population for the pilot breeding program, which has now officially begun. Eventually the Phoenix Zoo will transfer one male and one female to Miller Park Zoo in Bloomington, Illinois, possibly in the spring of 2015, with the hope of establishing a breeding pair there.

The 10-year pilot project is part of the MGRS recovery effort and is designed to understand their husbandry needs. This subspecies has been separated from other red squirrel populations for approximately 10,000 years (since the last ice age). Its only habitat is in the Pinaleno Mountains (located in the Coronado National Forest in Graham County, Arizona), which, in recent years, has

suffered from two large fires (1996 and 2004) affecting approximately 35,000 acres of forested area. Extended drought (especially in the higher-elevation forest types) and outbreaks of forest insects and other tree diseases have also negatively impacted their habitat. Population estimates for the red squirrel have shown a 48% decline over the past 15 years, from over 560 individuals in 1999 to around 270 individuals in 2013. The potential for large-scale fires to occur in the only remaining habitat of the MGRS remains very high, and continues to threaten this subspecies with extinction.

Red squirrels are territorial in nature, and therefore must be housed separately while in a managed setting. Females are in estrus for only approximately eight hours each year, making it challenging to determine the proper time to bring males and females together to breed. Phoenix Zoo staff have been studying the behavior and management of this subspecies since the Zoo first received MGRS from the wild as part of an emergency action due to wildfires in 2011.

"This serves as a great example of how strong partnerships are necessary to achieve our mutual conservation goals," said Steve Spangle, Supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Arizona Ecological Services Field Office. "No one entity could have done this alone."

The Phoenix Zoo's Arthur L. and Elaine V. Johnson Center was established in 2007 to work specifically on priority issues related to native wildlife species recovery. "The Johnson Center staff are experts at developing and refining breeding protocols for animals destined to be released to the wild," says Stuart Wells, Director of Conservation and Science at the Phoenix Zoo "We have already learned a great deal about how to care for this critically endangered squirrel and will continue to develop the necessary husbandry, rearing, breeding and release protocols."

The Phoenix Zoo is the only zoo in the Valley accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and is a non-profit zoological park, serving 1.4 million guests annually. Home to more than 1,400 animals and many endangered and threatened species, the Zoo provides experiences that inspire people and motivate them to care for the natural world. For information on upcoming events, exhibits and activities at the Phoenix Zoo, visit www.phoenixzoo.org.

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