

Species Fact Sheet
Mazama pocket gopher
***Thomomys mazama* (ssp. *couchi*, *douglasii*,
glacialis, *louiei*, *melanops*, *pugetensis*,
tacomensis, *tumuli*, *yelmensis*)**



STATUS: CANDIDATE

The Mazama pocket gopher potentially occurs in Clallam, Clark, Mason, Wahkiakum, Lewis, Thurston, and Pierce Counties, Washington.

(Map may reflect historical as well as recent sightings)

The Washington populations of the Mazama pocket gopher, *Thomomys mazama* (ssp. *couchi*, *douglasii*, *glacialis*, *louiei*, *melanops*, *pugetensis*, *tacomensis*, *tumuli*, *yelmensis*), became a candidate for federal listing in 2001.

Current and Historical Status

The Mazama pocket gopher is a regional endemic species found only in western Washington, western Oregon and northern California. Nine subspecies have been identified in western Washington. Historical and current status of these

populations is limited to distributional information. *T. mazama* most likely declined with the disappearance of Puget Sound prairies. In Washington, Mazama pocket gophers are known to persist at more than 40 sites scattered across the southern Puget Sound grasslands and alpine meadows of the Olympics. Some of these populations contain several thousand individuals, but many are small populations on marginal sites that are unlikely to persist. The largest populations occur on Fort Lewis, on/near the Olympia and Shelton airports, and possibly in the Olympic National Park. Today, two subspecies of this taxa, *T. m. tacomensis* and *T. m. louiei*, are presumed to be extinct.

Description and Life History

Mazama pocket gophers are medium-sized, light brown to almost black burrowing rodents, about 5 to 6 inches in length. They are stocky and tubular in shape, with short necks, powerful limbs, long claws, and tiny ears and eyes. Although their vision is poor, highly sensitive nearly hairless tails may assist in navigation through tunnels. External fur-lined pouches are used to transport food and nesting material. Their diet includes a wide variety of plant material, including leafy vegetation, succulent roots, shoots, and tubers.

Pocket gophers rarely surface completely from their burrows, although they do disperse above ground. They are highly asocial and intolerant of other gophers except during mating season and prior to weaning young. Sexual maturity is reached at 1 year. Mating is most likely polygamous and based on female choice. Gestation is typically 18 or 19 days. Generally, females have only one litter, on average 3 to 4 young, each year between March and June.

Habitat

The Mazama pocket gopher is associated with glacial outwash prairies in western Washington. Pocket gopher distribution is highly patchy, partly due to the patchy distribution of the prairies, but also due to soil rockiness within the prairie expanses. In prairie ecosystems, pocket gopher activity is important in maintaining plant species richness and diversity.

Reasons for Decline

The biggest threat to Mazama pocket gophers is loss and modification of habitat. The prairies of south Puget Sound are currently one of the rarest habitats in the United States. The basic ecological processes that maintain prairies have disappeared from, or have been altered on the few remaining protected prairie sites. Current subpopulations of Mazama pocket gopher continue to be threatened by loss of prairie habitat due to residential and commercial development, invasive plants, and encroachment of non-prairie plants due to an altered fire regime; small-population effects; trapping and poisoning; predation by

domestic dogs and cats; and trampling and crushing of burrows due to heavy equipment use.

Conservation Efforts

Preserving and restoring historic and existing gopher habitat is essential for the conservation of this species. Since 2005, The Nature Conservancy has been working with Fort Lewis on prairie habitat enhancement and management on lands on and adjacent to the Fort. Restoration and management of prairie habitats have also been initiated in Thurston County on the Black River-Mima Prairie Glacial Heritage Preserve, Scatter Creek Wildlife Area, West Rocky Prairie Wildlife Area, Rocky Prairie Natural Area Preserve, and at Wolf Haven International.

Experimental translocation of gophers to land owned by Wolf Haven International continues. As of winter 2010, the gophers have persisted in this location.

References and Links

[Listing Status 2001](#)

[Species Assessment](#)

[USFWS Threatened and Endangered Species Profile](#)

[The Nature Conservancy](#)

[USFWS Endangered Species Program](#)

[WDFW Status Report 2005](#)

[Wolf Haven](#)