

Pretty in Pink: Yreka Phlox Dresses Up China Hill

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The landscape on China Hill is dry, and rocky – reminiscent of one of those artists' renditions of the surface of a far-away and desolate planet. One wonders what could ever grow in such rough terrain. But junipers and other scraggy shrubs are there to remind you that you are indeed in the arid upper reaches of northern California.

But something special occurs here in the spring. The drab hillside is transformed into a magical place that pops to life with the emergence of dozens of bright pink flowers. The contrast to the surrounding landscape is vivid. It looks as if someone pinned dozens of corsages to the hillside as a rite of Spring.

Sharp-eyed locals who know where to look can catch a glimpse of this colorful show as they zoom their way along I-5 through the town of Yreka, where China Hill rises several hundred yards to the East of the freeway.

There are also some locals who are astonished to learn of this “secret” flower.

“I have been here for over 20 years” said one Yreka native, who accompanied a team of Service biologists to China Hill. “I never knew this flower existed.”

The plant in question is the endangered and extremely rare *Phlox hirsuta*, commonly known as Yreka phlox. It grows in small clusters no higher than six inches above the ground. As butterflies and moths pollinate it, the blooms go from bright pink to a pleasing shade of white that is equally as eye-catching against the staid brown-tone geology of the region.

Yreka Fish and Wildlife Office biologists Nadine Kanim, Dave Johnson and Tim Burnett have been busy collecting data on the phlox since late March, when the blooms first appeared. This effort formally kicks off the implementation phase of the recovery plan for Yreka phlox.

The Yreka FWS biologists spend a few days each week in the field collecting data on the phlox. A part of this effort includes developing a monitoring system that will enable them to determine if the species is declining in number over time.

The biggest threat to Yreka phlox has been urban development. But because there are only five known occurrences of the flower in the world – all in the vicinity of Yreka – random events such as fire, drought and disease are also of great concern.

The data that Kanim, Johnson and Burnett are collecting are central to the recovery plan. If the Service can show that the plant has not declined after 10 years – and if other occurrences of the plant has been secured, then the plant can be downlisted to threatened status, or possibly removed from the endangered species list.

Kanim is hopeful that such a goal can be reached, perhaps even in as little as 10 years.

“There is a lot of support in the community to recover Yreka phlox – from the local timber company to the city and county governments to average citizens,” said Kanim. “The recovery team has identified the threats to the species and our local partners have already made a lot of progress to protect the plant from various hazards.”

Kanim noted that the Yreka phlox recovery effort is a good example of how the federal government is working with local communities to preserve a unique and precious resource for the enjoyment of future generations.

“One of the main goals of the recovery plan is to enhance awareness of this species and to eventually involve the public in actual recovery efforts,” said Kanim. “This is a significant component of the recovery plan and we are looking forward to getting out in the community and working with local citizens.”

A key partner in the phlox recovery effort is the City of Yreka, which has purchased – or obtained through donations – nearly 75 percent of the land on China Hill. This has been a tremendous achievement and has saved the Yreka phlox from being destroyed by development.

City planning officials are also hopeful that one day it can provide full sanctuary for the phlox and turn China Hill into a public park, complete with an interpretative center that will one day tell the story of how one small community came together to save a pretty pink flower from the verge of extinction.



Caption: Yreka Fish and Wildlife Biologists Nadine Kanim and Dave Johnson take a census of Yreka phlox. The Yreka FWO recently began to the implementation phase of the Recovery Plan for Yreka Phlox.

Photo: USFWS/ M. Baun



Dozens of corsage-like clusters similar to this one, dress up China Hill during springtime in Yreka, Calif. Photo: USFWS/C. Oakley