

# Lawsuit settlement could increase habitat protection for Salt Creek tiger beetle

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Salt Creek tiger beetle in the saline wetlands near Little Salt Creek. (LJS file)

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will go back to the beginning and re-evaluate critical habitat protection in Lancaster and Saunders counties for the endangered Salt Creek tiger beetle.

The decision, the result of a lawsuit settled this week, could increase the amount of land protected for the species' recovery.

More than 90 percent of the endangered Salt Creek tiger beetle's saline wetland habitat has been destroyed or severely degraded in the past 50 years. Last year, researchers counted 205 tiger beetles. The number has dwindled from a high of 558 in 2004 to a low of 153 in 2005, when the service listed the beetle as endangered.

Three conservation groups -- The Center for Native Ecosystems, Center for Biological Diversity and the Xerces Society -- sued the Fish and Wildlife Service in February, saying it was not protecting enough habitat to save the insect.

"This settlement simply means that we are going back to the drawing board again and do it over again," said Bob Harms, with the Fish and Wildlife Service office in Grand Island.

"There's no final number we have in mind at this time that we're shooting for."

The service plans to re-examine areas that already have been designated critical habitat along Little Salt Creek north of Lincoln and Rock Creek south of Ceresco, but also new areas in the upper reaches of Salt Creek in southern Lancaster County, Harms said.

The service also will look for areas to serve as buffer zones to protect salt flats, which are critical to the insect's survival.

Despite the lack of specifics, University of Nebraska-Lincoln entomologist Steve Spomer said the news is good.

"The more habitat, the better it would be for the beetle," he said.

Spomer recently started his annual population survey of tiger beetles and found just four.

"With this hot weather, they tend to emerge en masse. I was expecting to see a lot more than that," Spomer said. "But I think things are later this year, overall."

The service has not set a timetable, but Harms said the re-evaluation must be completed by April 1, 2013, so its recommendation can be published in the Federal Register.

In April 2010, the federal agency designated 1,933 acres of critical habitat for the beetle even though scientists had determined more than 36,000 acres were needed.

"With today's agreement, the unique Salt Creek tiger beetle has a chance at recovery," Megan Mueller, a biologist with the Center for Native Ecosystems, said in a news release. "Protecting the beetle will benefit a host of other wildlife and people by protecting wetlands and rivers in Nebraska."

The tiger beetle once occupied extensive areas of saline marshes and streams in Lancaster and Saunders counties. Urban and agricultural sprawl have reduced it to three populations on the edges of Little Salt Creek north of Lincoln.

"The Salt Creek tiger beetle needs extensive critical habitat protection to survive," said Noah Greenwald, endangered species director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "There's just no way to recover species like this beetle without protecting their homes."

In 2005, agency and academic scientists assembled by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identified more than 36,000 acres of critical habitat for the recovery of the tiger beetle.

At the request of officials in the regional and Washington, D.C., offices of the service, the figure was whittled to 14,334 acres, which some team members deemed the bare minimum needed for survival.

"With just a few hundred Salt Creek tiger beetles remaining, it is essential that the Fish and Wildlife Service set aside sufficient habitat to actually allow this rare species to recover," said

Sarina Jepsen, Xerces Society's endangered species program director. "We hope that the service will consider the recommendations of scientists when they make their new decision."

Scientists consider the tiger beetle an indicator species. Its presence signals the existence of a healthy saline marsh; the ground water feeding these wetlands passes through rock formations containing salts deposited by an ancient sea that once covered Nebraska.

Over the past century, more than 230 species of birds have been reported to use eastern Nebraska saline marshes, including the least tern, piping plover and peregrine falcon. These saline wetlands also are home to several salt-tolerant plants that are found nowhere else in Nebraska.

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