

Lawsuit to target tiger beetle habitat

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By [ALGIS J. LAUKAITIS / Lincoln Journal Star](#) JournalStar.com | Posted: Thursday, December 16, 2010 2:30 pm | [\(16\) Comments](#)



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

Three conservation groups on Thursday announced plans to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for not protecting enough critical habitat to save the endangered Salt Creek tiger beetle.

The Center for Native Ecosystems, The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation and the Center for Biological Diversity say the nearly 2,000 acres identified by the federal agency is not enough to ensure the survival of the species.

The Salt Creek tiger beetle, one of the rarest insects in the world, is found only in northern Lancaster and southern Saunders counties. This past summer, researchers counted 205 insects, a slight increase from the 194 counted in 2009.

"The unique Salt Creek tiger beetle needs protection of additional habitat if it is to have any chance of 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."

Bob Harms, a biologist in the Fish and Wildlife Service's Grand Island office, said he had just received the formal notice of intent to sue filed by the three groups and declined to comment.

The Salt Creek tiger beetle was listed as a federal endangered species in 2005. By then, more than 90 percent of its salt marsh habitat had been destroyed or degraded because of encroaching development and farming.

On April 6, the Fish and Wildlife Service announced that 1,993 acres between Lincoln and Ceresco would be designated as critical habitat for the Salt Creek tiger beetle.

That same day, The Xerces Society, a nonprofit group dedicated to conserving invertebrates, said that was not enough land for recovery of the beetle.

"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, The Xerces Society endangered species program director. "We hope that the service will withdraw their critical habitat decision and consider the recommendations of scientists when they make their new decision."

In 2005, a multiagency team of scientists assembled by the Fish and Wildlife Service identified more than 36,000 acres of critical habitat for the tiger beetle. The federal agency then asked that the number be reduced.

The team did so, recommending about 15,000 acres, which it said is the minimum needed for recovery of the insect. Those acres further were reduced to 7,300 before being whittled down to nearly 2,000 acres.

Steve Spomer, an entomologist with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said the planned lawsuit is no surprise, considering the Fish and Wildlife Service's drastic reduction of critical habitat acres. He said The Xerces Society has a track record of taking such legal actions.

"It's potentially good news," Spomer said. "It designates more land for restoration and re-introduction. It might be a moot point if the beetle continues to decline."

The Saline Wetlands Conservation Partnership has been acquiring land since 2003 to save the tiger beetle and the remaining saline wetlands, which are critical to its survival.

The partnership, which includes the City of Lincoln, the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District, The Nature Conservancy, Lancaster County and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, has bought or obtained easements on more than 2,000 acres between Lincoln and Ceresco.

Of the 1,993 acres designated as critical habitat by the Fish and Wildlife Service, 714 are owned by the state and 1,219 by the city, NRD and private landowners, according the federal agency.

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