

Day spreads awareness for endangered species

By ALISHA SEMCHUCK
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LANCASTER — Populations of mountain yellow-legged frogs have severely declined in the Angeles National Forest.

Peter Johnston, a U.S. Forest Service wildlife biologist, told a group of a dozen people attending an Endangered Species Day recognition Saturday at Antelope Valley College that particular frog population dwindled to less than 200.

"It's one of the most critically endangered species in the U.S. right now," said Johnston, who was one of 11 speakers at the event, organized by the Antelope Valley Conservancy.

The mountain yellow-legged frog can now be found in only seven locations in the Angeles and San Bernardino national forests, he noted.

"Some of those populations are just a handful of frogs," he said.

At one location, a single frog has been spotted along with some tadpoles.

"So, there is some reproduction going on," the forest service biologist said.

He also discussed conditions of the arroyo toad, currently on the endangered species list, and the California red-legged frog, a threatened species.

A population of the arroyo toad lives at the Littlerock Reservoir, he

said. Two populations of the California red-legged frog live in Angeles National Forest.

"Those are the southern-most populations," he said. "Others are found further up the coast, around Los Padres (National Forest). They used to be found in the San Bernardino and Cleveland national forests. They've been extirpated from those. They no longer exist in those locations."

The California condor is "probably the highest profile among endangered species," Johnston said, noting that's largely because of that animal's visibility, compared to much smaller amphibians.

Mark Bratton, the lead biologist at Edwards Air Force Base, explained how the Department of Defense protects wildlife on more than 2 million acres of land where military bases exist in the California desert, including the China Lake naval weapons center, Edwards, Fort Irwin and Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center.

Biologists on base must adhere to an Integrated National Resources Management Plan, which requires them to document all the species living on a base and explains "how we're going to protect them," he said.

That report is updated annually, and gets sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for review.

At Edwards, Bratton said, the desert tortoise is the only species currently listed as threatened.

Base biologists attach radio tracking devices to female tortoises, which then roam freely. When females are about ready to lay their eggs, they are placed in a holding pen. After they lay their eggs, the females are released back into the wild, Bratton said.

After the eggs hatch, Bratton said, the biologists keep the babies in a sheltered area until they are old enough and strong enough to defend against predators.

Otherwise, Bratton said, "the little guys get picked off by ravens and other creatures." That policy has been in effect for the last five years, he noted.

"The Air Force has spent thousands of dollars trying to bring the tortoise population back," Bratton said.

"Why protect the tortoise?" Bratton asked rhetorically. "It's an indicator species. If the tortoise is not doing good, that means the environment is not doing good."

In addition to the attention given the desert tortoise, base biologists also manage other resident species not listed as endangered, as a preventative measure. The Mohave ground squirrel is one example, he said.

For "me personally, every day is

endangered species day," Bratton said.

Author Bonnie Stone described the Antelope Valley as "a wonderful gateway to all the wilderness areas of Northern and Southern California."

"Our poppy reserve is the only one in the state. A park that doesn't get much publicity is to the west of that," Stone said, in reference to the Arthur B. Ripley Desert Woodland State Park, a park kept completely in its natural state.

Stone described other local state parks as well and said the Exotic Feline Breeding Compound of the Feline Conservation Center in Rosamond is impressive.

"It's like a boutique zoo," Stone said. "You can get eyeball to eyeball with the cats there."

Laura Wambsgans and Lorelle Miller, Santa Clarita-based artists, talked about painting out in nature, surrounded by wildlife.

"We paint in the field what we see," Wambsgans said.

"Most of the times, people don't see the beauty of nature," Miller said. So they put together a project called, "Chasing Open Spaces."

"Our job: We're trying to educate," Miller said.

"When the environment goes," Wambsgans said, "the animal goes."

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PROTECTING WILDLIFE

Mark Bratton speaks about "The Desert Tortoise Head Start Program," at Saturday's 5th Annual Endangered Species Day Conference at Antelope Valley College.

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