



Recovering America's Wildlife Act Is A Priority Bill For 2022

Wildlife Cannot Wait

It's been over a year since the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, along with 22 other plants and animals, was officially declared extinct by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Destruction of their forest habitat largely caused the decline. Conservationists around the world mourned the announcement. The loss of the third largest woodpecker in the world rang through the hearts of those passionate about wildlife and sparked a fearful feeling that more wildlife species would become extinct because of human activity.

Conservation organizations, state and federal departments, and outdoor enthusiasts feel and know that Recovering America's Wildlife Act is a priority and must-pass bill this year. If passed, this bill would provide \$1.4 billion in funding to address the one-third of U.S. wildlife species facing and nearing extinction.

That notion is no different in Arizona.

Nearly a month ago, I had the opportunity to join volunteers from the U.S. Forest Service and the Arizona Chapter of Trout Unlimited to restock Gila Trout in Marijilda Creek, a beautiful and rugged area in the Coronado National Forest near Safford, Arizona.

The restocking was hosted by the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Native Trout and Chub program, which has been instrumental in increasing trout populations throughout the state. That work helps ensure future generations of native trout in Arizona and assures the continued success of recreational fishing throughout Arizona.

It's true that Arizona species are well-adapted to the heat, whether it's defecating on their feet to keep cool — shout-out to Turkey Vultures — or hiding in saguaros. However, there's still concern about how well Arizona animals and plants will continue to adapt to increasing temperatures, decreasing water, and threats to water quality.

As I hiked the rough terrain with 15 other conservation-minded individuals, I heard the fascinating history of the Gila Trout. This species, in addition to the Apache Trout, are the most threatened trout in Arizona and one of the rarest species in the U.S. They were one of the species added to the Endangered Species Act of 1973, but thanks to restoration efforts, were delisted to threatened in 2006.

Volunteers at Marijilda Creek carried hundreds of fish in buckets on their backs as they tried to not stumble over fallen, burned trees over our several mile-long hike. People told stories of how fires last year almost killed off entire groups of trout at fisheries like Mora National Fish Hatchery in New Mexico. That same fishery provides Arizona with the trout we need to sustain native populations in our rivers, creeks, and streams. Streams in Arizona have had to have Gila Trout evacuated to avoid severe population loss, which is what happened in 2017 with the fires in Mount Graham near the Marijilda Creek.

Every year our forests are ravaged with fires that can — and unfortunately have — devastated our wildlife. Even if the fires don't reach trout streams, post-wildfire floods can just as easily threaten our native trout.

When we all finally reached deeper areas of the Marijilda Creek, our Arizona Game and Fish Department experts carefully considered which pools of water would give the fish the best chance of survival.

After all the hard work of that day, we walked back up the creek and discussed the possibility of another fire raging through the area and erasing our efforts. Every person there from the Arizona Game and Fish Department, Trout Unlimited Arizona, and the U.S. Forest Service expressed their concerns with the vulnerability of the Gila Trout. These organizations have recovery plans in place, but funding is necessary.

Recovering America's Wildlife Act is the best solution. U.S. state wildlife agencies have identified more than 12,000 species in need of conservation attention and current federal funding is less than five percent of what is necessary to conserve these species. This bill would actually save us money in the long-run — once a species reaches the point of needing the protection of the Endangered Species Act, recovery becomes significantly more uncertain, more difficult and more expensive. Proactive efforts taken earlier in a species' decline are better for wildlife and cost less money.

The \$1.4 billion that Recovering America's Wildlife Act would provide goes towards on-the-ground conservation efforts such as conserving and restoring habitats, fighting invasive species, reintroducing native species and tackling emerging diseases that threaten wildlife survival.

Recovering America's Wildlife Act has already passed through the House with bipartisan support, but it is running out of time to be passed by Congress this year. If U.S. Congressional Members choose to sit on this bill, we have to wait another year to try again. That means that those 12,000 species — including the Gila Trout — stay in danger.

Declaring a species extinct is no easy task — even now people still report sightings of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. An even more difficult task, however, is in deciding when to begin helping those of greatest conservation need to avoid more extinctions. This is a once in a generation opportunity this Congress has to build on our nation's outdoor heritage.

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