

Pygmy Rabbit Down

Repopulating an Endangered Species Isn't Easy, Even When You're Working With Rabbits

Sightings (front of the book section); Nature Conservancy, Winter 2007

Len Zeoli, a graduate student at Washington State University, expected the fieldwork for his doctoral research to last about two years. In March 2007, he began tracking 20 endangered Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits. The mango-sized, sagebrush munching animals—one of the rare rabbit species to dig its own burrow—had been bred and raised in captivity and released on a 3,500-acre plot of state land in eastern Washington.

But Zeoli's field time was to end a few short months later. Most of the rabbits and dispersed or were eaten by predators. By late summer, only two remained.

The saga goes back to the 1990s, when the population of the pygmy rabbits began to nosedive. In 2001, when the population dropped to just 20, state wildlife officials captured 16 of the remaining rabbits and took them to breeding facilities.

"At first we couldn't get them to mate," says Lisa Shipley, a Washington State University wildlife ecologist. "They just sat there next to each other." So the scientists reluctantly interbred survivors with a genetically distinct pygmy rabbit population from Idaho. Careful breeding ensured that each rabbit remained at least 75 percent Columbia Basin. Pregnancy rates improved.

Saving a species is tough work, says state biologist Dave Hays about the 2007 pygmy rabbit release. "We didn't know what was going to happen." Until recently, Hays coordinated the project, bringing together government agencies, scientists, and landowners, as well as The Nature Conservancy—which provided alternative grazing sites to keep cattle out of the release area and supplied volunteers. The Conservancy will host a future release of the rabbits on one of its nearby Washington preserves.

The reintroduction team is drawing up plans to ensure more successful releases in the future. Control predators more aggressively, release more animals, train rabbits in survival tactics—every option is being carefully weighed. "It's a very interesting process, working on endangered species, because the sample size is so small," says Rod Saylor, a conservation biologist at Washington State.

Despite the initial setback to his research, Zeoli remains undaunted—and inspired by his sighting one June morning of a pygmy rabbit kit: cute-as-a-button evidence of successful reproduction in the wild. The kit was a real morale booster. As Shipley says, "When you start with just 16 rabbits, it's an uphill climb."