

Rare Butterfly Returns to Peninsula Park

by Heather Ishimaru

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Apr. 5 - KGO - A rare butterfly that disappeared from one of its Bay Area habitats four years ago has returned. The Bay Checkerspot Butterfly came home after biologists discovered what was killing them -- well-intentioned humans.

The Bay Checkerspot Butterfly disappeared from Edgewood Park and National Preserve about the same time Sarah Pike was born.

Sarah Pike: "I've never held a real butterfly in my whole life!"

ABC7's Heather Ishimaru: "How old are you?"

Sarah Pike: "Four-and-a-half!"

Sarah is getting to hold this butterfly thanks to scientific sleuth Stuart Weiss. He's an ecologist and butterfly biologist who figured out why the Checkerspot vanished from this Redwood City Preserve four years ago.

Stuart Weiss, Ecologist: "In this case this really was the caterpillar in the coalmine, in that when it went extinct it gave us the impetus to look at the situation more closely, and that's when I found out about the ammonia coming out of the cars."

Highway 280 borders the park. Catalytic converters designed to get toxic nitrogen oxides out of the air created an unexpected by-product - a powerful fertilizer. The ammonium coming out of the cars passing by on 280 was spewing the equivalent of four bags of fertilizer per acre, per year.

That spurred growth of a plant called Italian ryegrass, which overran and suffocated the butterflies' food -- like the Tidy Tip Wildflowers. The solution was to cut back the ryegrass. Weiss released 12 Bay Checkerspots Thursday, 1,000 Wednesday.

Susan Sommers has loved this piece of land since the late 1960's.

Susan Sommers, Park Advocate: "They used to say there was no rare and endangered plants out here, they used to say there was not water out here, they used to say there was nothing but weeds out here. But when you start looking, you can see things."

ABC7's Heather Ishimaru: "What does it feel like?"

Sarah Pike: "Its feels like ticklish!"

What happened here should help scientists begin to understand the effects of ammonium on other habitats. And help the Checkerspot take one step closer to coming off the endangered species list.

The Backstory, by Heather Ishimaru

Apr. 5 - KGO - In the early 1990's, the Bay Checkerspot Butterfly saved Edgewood Park from becoming a golfcourse. The butterfly's endangered status prevented the course from being built. And now, the people who love the park have saved the Checkerspot. A potpourri of funding from PG&E, REI (Recreational Equipment Inc.) and a variety of government sources helped too.

Dr. Stuart Weiss brought about a thousand larvae from the San Jose area to re-populate Edgewood Park. He will be out there again in February counting caterpillars. The park will need constant monitoring and well-timed mowing to prevent the Italian rye grass from coming getting out of hand again.

The Checkerspots are ideal wildlife for a media event. They don't bite, scratch and oddly, don't fly away. They sat and sat and sat on potted wildflowers and children's hands. Why? As you might recall from your kindergarten teacher, they need heat from the sun to rev up their engines before they can fly. That's why they stay, open and closing their wings, to soak up the sun.