

Quest for Endangered Mission Blue Butterflies

by John Coté
*San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco,
California,
April 17, 2009*

Stuart Weiss crept along a windswept ridge of San Bruno Mountain looking for his quarry. A white net fluttered behind him like a windsock. "Be very quiet," Weiss said. "We're hunting Mission blue butterflies."

Weiss laughed at his Elmer Fudd impersonation. "We get a little silly out in the field," he said.

But the work of saving the endangered Mission blue is anything but a laughing matter for Weiss and San Francisco city officials. On Thursday they began to reintroduce the insects on Twin Peaks, one of the butterflies' few remaining habitats and a spot where only a few are thought to live.



A Mission blue butterfly rests on a silver lupine flower on Twin Peaks in San Francisco, California, on Thursday, April 16, 2009. Members of San Francisco's Recreation and Park Department along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are trying to reintroduce the butterfly, an endangered species, back to the area. (photo by Hardy Wilson)

Still, a sense of humor came in handy during the painstaking work of trying to capture pregnant butterflies from the mountaintop near Brisbane.

The hope Thursday was to net 22 pregnant females. The result: two.

That's progress, though, and the city's Recreation and Park Department, with the help of Weiss' Menlo Park-based Creekside Center for Earth Observation, has until early June to try to catch the rest under a permit issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"It's better than zero," said Lisa Wayne, overseeing the project for the Recreation and Park Department, as fine mesh was placed over two mounds of silver lupine - the butterfly's natural host plant - on Twin Peaks. The two pregnant Mission blues driven from San Bruno Mountain were released under the mesh.



Biologist Stu Weiss (center) wraps silver lupine flowers with netting before putting a Mission blue butterfly inside it Thursday on Twin Peaks in San Francisco. (photo by Hardy Wilson)

The white veils were removed a few hours later after the butterflies had a chance to adjust to their new home.

The Twin Peaks' population of Mission blue butterflies, which have been listed as an endangered species since 1976, has crashed in recent years. The suspected culprit is 1998's El Niño storms, which seriously damaged the silver lupine in the area.

Between 2001 and 2007, Recreation and Park staffers observed only two adults and two larvae on Twin Peaks, down from 10



Biologist Stu Weiss releases a Mission blue butterfly into a net filled with silver lupine flowers. (photo by Hardy Wilson)

adults in 1997 and more than 150 in 1981.

Last year, only one was spotted, said Jared Blumenfeld, interim San Francisco parks chief.

"We've doubled the population," Blumenfeld said after the relocation. "It kind of gives you hope."

Contact John Coté at jcote@sfgate.com.

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/04/17/BA9M173V2U.DTL&hw=weiss&sn=003&sc=582>

Copyright © 2009 San Francisco Chronicle