



NPR 24 Hour Program Stream

**back at base**

# Military Bases Serve As Safe Haven For Endangered Species

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Heard on All Things Considered

JAY PRICE

**Military bases turn out to be a haven for endangered species. A decision long ago by the military that working with conservationists was a better strategy than fighting them is one of the reasons why.**

**ARI SHAPIRO, HOST:**

The Pentagon, environmental groups and others have quietly built a vast conservation network around the nation's military bases. These unlikely partners are protecting hundreds of threatened and endangered plants and animals, entire tracts of rare ecosystems and America's national security. Jay Price of member station WUNC brings us this report from Fort Bragg, N.C.

**(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)****UNIDENTIFIED MAN:** Quadrant 3-1-3.

**JAY PRICE, BYLINE:** About four miles from this artillery unit is a biological paradise. It's the home of a startling number of exotic plants and the last refuge of one of the world's rarest butterflies.

(SOUNDBITE OF GUNSHOT)

PRICE: And that is the Army's largest howitzer. The 103-pound high-explosive shell is the first in a barrage, hurdling right at those butterflies who happen to live in the impact zone for artillery training.

(SOUNDBITE OF GUNSHOT)

PRICE: The training kills some of the delicate, thumbnail-sized butterflies. They're called the St. Francis satyr. Nick Haddad studies them. The lanky, easy-going North Carolina State University biologist says the explosions also help keep the species alive.

NICK HADDAD: The artillery sets fires, and those fires burn across the forest, keeping it open, but they also burn across the wetlands, keeping the wetlands open. These butterflies need disturbance for their populations to survive.

PRICE: A rare butterfly that needs to be shot at with artillery. It's wild story - one-of-a-kind, right? - except this kind of story is almost common at military bases. In fact, there are at least three kinds of endangered butterflies surviving on military ranges, including one at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, south of Seattle. Jeff Foster manages an army conservation program there.

JEFF FOSTER: Military bases also tend to be reservoirs for biodiversity - lots of rare plants and animals and plant communities - because they aren't developed for other purposes, like cities and agriculture.

PRICE: In fact, bases have the highest density of threatened and endangered plants and animals of any federal lands, even more than national parks like Yellowstone. Like many bases, Bragg and Lewis-McChord are a century old. They were built when the U.S. population was a third of what it is now and before development had gobbled so much forest, beach and prairie. That makes bases a kind of biological time capsule. They're now home to more than 425 threatened and endangered species.

FOSTER: But that can sometimes be a problem. Sometimes the needs of those species conflict with the needs of military training.

**PRICE:** That's exactly what happened at Fort Bragg, the nation's largest Army base, the home of Special Forces, Delta Force, the 82nd Airborne Division and the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. In the 1980s, the region's woodpecker population was shrinking. Monica Stevenson now oversees environmental work on the base.

**MONICA STEVENSON:** In 1990, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a biological opinion that required us to protect the woodpeckers. And then that really had an impact on training.

**PRICE:** Bragg had to ship troops out of state for some training. The base's mission was at risk.

**STEVENSON:** We just had to find an alternate way of achieving training. We just, you know, had to come up with a different way of doing business.

**PRICE:** And they did, an unexpected way. The Army decided to work with conservationists, including the Nature Conservancy, to build the bird's population back up, especially on land around the base.

**STEVENSON:** Well, we met our recovery goal.

**PRICE:** The woodpecker population rebounded, and training restrictions were gradually lifted. And the collaboration became a national model. The Pentagon has participated in 88 partnerships like this in 30 states. It's spent more than \$1 billion on those efforts and attracted another half-billion from conservation groups and other partners. That money helps preserve land around the bases to give the animals and plants more space and protect the bases from encroaching development that could harm training.

**HADDAD:** And I'm calling that a female, so I'm going to catch it.

**PRICE:** The Army's partnership with biologist Nick Haddad to restore that rare butterfly at Fort Bragg is making progress, too. About two days a year, when the cannons aren't firing, the Army lets Haddad onto the artillery impact zone.

HADDAD: And so there we go.

(SOUNDBITE OF BIRD WINGS FLAPPING)

HADDAD: Netted it. Now I've got to be super careful with these because they're delicate.

PRICE: It's a kind of wonderland of exotic pitcher plants and wild orchids and unexploded shells. It's so dangerous the Army sends an explosives expert in with him.

HADDAD: Now let me just get it out of the net, which is always the trickiest part. So it's a small, brown butterfly.

PRICE: During those two days, Haddad and an Army biologist try to find two to four females. Haddad's team uses those to raise more butterflies in a greenhouse the Army built. Then they release them on sites around the base where they've created a habitat just like the artillery range after a fire has burned through - mostly open wetlands with just a little underbrush and trees spaced just so.

HADDAD: We finally are having success at restoring butterflies outside the range, given what we've learned inside the range.

PRICE: Which means that at least some of the butterflies won't need to be shot at to survive. For NPR News, this is Jay Price at Fort Bragg, N.C.

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