

Rare beetle bugs developer

Subdivision backers, foes clash over insect habitat

By DAN WHITE
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SCOTTS VALLEY — For many residents protesting a housing development on Glenwood Meadow, the Ohlone tiger beetle has become their poster insect.

A local campaign to protect the beetle has turned the shy insect into a creature of controversy. The iridescent green predator graced a protest placard at local public hearings. It has also surfaced in letters to the city and planning debates.

For opponents of the upscale 156-home project on 218 acres of meadow, the Ohlone tiger beetle represents the loss of suburban Scotts Valley's "wild" places, the tenuous nature of open space and the battle for biodiversity.



Now, two simultaneous fights are going on over the meadow. While developers are vying to get their project approved, UC Santa Cruz graduate student Grey Hayes is jockeying to get the rarely seen beetle on the endangered species list.

He has submitted his petition and is now awaiting word from the federal government.

Hayes says any project on the as yet undeveloped meadow could deal a blow to the species. On the other side are those who are claiming insect overkill, most notably developer Chop Keenan, whose remarks about the "common bug" have infuriated beetle back-

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ers.

The Ohlone tiger beetle's bright shell may be showy looking, but it is shy. Prone to flying off when people approach, it is aggressive only when ambushing invertebrates and tackling smaller insects.

This animal has been around for eons without anyone knowing it existed. But the Glenwood building proposal has suddenly made this retiring creature controversial. It now has a supporting but still important role in project discussions.

Hayes, in the UCSC environmental studies program, studied the beetle for several years, charting its habits, examining its larvae and spending time at Glenwood meadow.

Hayes said it is difficult to pinpoint the population, but guesses there are no more than 5,000 on just a few acres. According to studies, the insect is closely tied to sparsely vegetated mudstone landscapes found only in five sections of Santa Cruz County, three of which are proposed for development.

They have no formal protection in any location.

The iridescent beetle has been found nowhere else in the world, said Randy Morgan, the biological consultant and Native Plant Society member who discovered and helped classify it.

One beetle haunt is Glenwood, where developers have set aside eight-tenths of an acre as an Ohlone tiger beetle "preserve" — a move which developers call appropriate, and which beetle trackers consider an empty gesture.

Neither Morgan nor Hayes are formally trained entomologists but both have thrown themselves into studying the tiger beetle and other insects. Dick Arnold, an entomologist and consultant, has also studied the beetle and advised the city. Citing his own survey and other studies, he has attested to the beetle's

limited geographic distribution.

Keenan, the driving force behind the Glenwood project, remarked last month that the tiger beetle is "probably the most common bug in the world and now it is going to have its own preserve."

Keenan, in an interview last week, stood by his remarks.

"Obviously the fact that we are addressing (the beetle issue) means we think it's more than frivolous," he said. "But you have to keep in mind that this is an insect — I guess the word 'bug' is pejorative — that is ubiquitous in America. And there are more of them than any other insect in the country. This one happens to have some unusual characteristics, and you can talk to the beetle people about that."

"I know a lot of people would rather see a ballpark there," said Keenan, referring to the insect preserve's proposed location, sandwiched between Siltanen Park playing fields. "But we don't want to flout the possibility that it could be listed" as an endangered species.

Morgan and Hayes argue that Keenan's interpretation of the Ohlone tiger beetle as just another "bug" ignores the fact that it is a unique species, from its coloring to its prairie-like habitat.

"It's got a pretty tenuous hold on life," said Morgan, who first collected the insect in 1990. "I heard that statement (Keenan) made, and if it were common at all, it would have been collected a long time ago."

Morgan launched an unsuccessful bid to have the Ohlone tiger beetle listed on the endangered species list. He was turned down in 1996 when the U.S. Fish And Wildlife Service cited insufficient habitat information.

Hayes, citing new data, submitted a second request for listing, which has been forwarded to Fish and Wildlife's Portland, Ore., regional office for consideration.

The regional office will make a final recommendation to Fish and

Wildlife offices in Washington, D.C., but no one knows when.

Fish And Wildlife agrees that the insect warrants serious consideration.

"We are concerned about the species," said Joan Jewett, public affairs chief at the service's regional offices in Portland. But she added, "we are not ready to make a determination yet."

In past cases, listing, if it happens at all, can take up to two years.

Meanwhile, Scotts Valley insists it is already treating the insect as if it is on the endangered species list.

The .8-acre buffer in the meadow is a response to concerns, but is also subject to more debate. The buffer has been proposed in the midst of a Siltanen Park extension that would be made only if the Glenwood project is built. Some in the city consider the park expansion to be the biggest benefit Scotts Valley would get from the developers.

The proposed beetle "preserve" near the park was the product of discussions between Bay Area entomological consultant Dick Arnold, the developers, and a Fish and Wildlife representatives. Arnold could not be reached for comment.

"This insect has a very specific habitat and that is where it is," developer Keenan said. "This is an adequate buffer."

But Hayes said the buffer is insufficient and irresponsible because not enough is known about the beetle's habitat requirements. Playing fields near the buffer zone would alter the landscape, which now serves as a breeding area for the beetle's prey, he said.

He is also concerned about watering at the field. The Ohlone tiger beetle depends on bare soil and drought conditions to survive, according to an entomological report filed with the city.

Morgan has said that there is no denying the loss of habitat, because the tiger beetle is found always in the same Santa Cruz mudstone

bedrock areas and nowhere else. Morgan calls the entire meadow an "island" of mudstone that must remain intact for the creature to live.

Community development director Laura Kuhn said that Scotts Valley is both showing concern for the beetle by setting up a buffer area, and also protecting itself in case the beetle ends up on the endangered species list. She also said that the city will consider further actions if the animal is listed.

While some in the community say this buffer idea is inadequate, others, including city Planning Commission Chairman Michael Shulman, question having a buffer at all. He said not enough is known about the insect.

"At what point does a species merit protection when that might impede the quality of the project?" Shulman said. "Is (the insect habitat) really shrinking? Is it growing? How would we know?"

He also argued that the Siltanen park expansion was the biggest benefit of the project and that the buffer could disrupt it. "I don't want to give any more than I need to, and it's right in the middle of the park."

Shulman said he also didn't want the city to find itself stuck maintaining the buffer even if the beetle isn't put on the endangered species list.

In the meantime, it's hard to say just how much this insect could affect Glenwood's future, aside from adding more fuel to the debate. If the beetle ends up on the endangered list, this alone would probably not stop development at Glenwood, although it would most likely lead to some restrictions, according to Fish and Wildlife.

"When something is listed as endangered, a developer has to apply for a permit and it is usually granted," said Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman Pat Foulk. "You figure that California has the most endangered species in the continental U.S., and I don't see a lot of development being stopped in this state."