

Salamander larvae discovered in Elkhorn Slough

Amphibian found at reserve for first time since 2006

By ALIA WILSON

awilson@santacruzsentinel.com

WATSONVILLE — Several Santa Cruz long-toed salamander larvae were discovered in Elkhorn Slough on Tuesday for the first time in four years, giving the endangered species a fighting chance at survival, researchers say.

The salamander, which has been federally listed as endangered since 1967, lives only in Monterey and southern Santa Cruz counties.

"This is an exciting find — if they hadn't bred in the pond this year, it might have meant that the population here on the reserve would blink out," Elkhorn Slough Reserve ecologist Nina D'Amore said. "(The larvae) are fat and happy, very rigorous."

The population of salamanders could go a maximum of five years without breeding successfully,

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BREE CANDILORO/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

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LARVAE

Continued from A1

D'Amore said, but the salamander only lives for 10, she said.

Researchers took samples Tuesday of Lower Cattail Swale, a pond in the reserve, to monitor threatened California red-legged frogs. They found six salamander larvae in the samples.

The discovery means there are likely many more larvae in the two-acre pond, which has been a hot spot for breeding in the past, according to D'Amore.

Other populations exist only at Oxbow Pond in Las Lomas, McClusky and Zmudowski sloughs and parts of Moro Cojo Slough, D'Amore said. Small populations also likely exist in pockets elsewhere in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties.

"This seems to be the highest density I've seen since I've been here," said D'Amore, who has been at the reserve since 2001.

Lehigh University post-doctoral researcher Wesley Savage, who has been studying the Santa Cruz long-toed salamander since 2002, will arrive next week to do further research on the discovery.

Larvae have been able to flourish after the Elkhorn Slough Foundation and the reserve purchased a land parcel upland from Cattail Swale several years ago, removing the land from agricultural production, D'Amore said. As a result, erosion and sediment flow into Cattail Swale was reduced and water quality improved.

"The water used to look like chocolate milk but now it's much clearer," D'Amore said. "They should be just fine where they are. We make sure they have enough water in the pond but it's been such a wet year we're not going to have supplement any. It's nice when we don't have to tinker too much."

Additional restoration efforts allowed Cattail Swale to hold water for longer lengths of time, giving animals such as the salamander and California red-legged frogs the chance to mature into adults.

"We're thrilled that restoration projects have improved water quality at the reserve to provide healthy habitat for Santa Cruz long-toed salamanders," D'Amore said. "I'll continue to conduct amphibian monitoring on the reserve and foundation lands to eagerly track the species progress."

SANTA CRUZ LONG-TOED SALAMANDER

■ Slender, with long toes. Dark brown to black above, with back stripe made of many light blotches. Belly sooty to dark brown.

■ Lives in only a few small ponds in southern Santa Cruz and Monterey counties.

■ Eggs laid singly on spike rushes near surface of water, or in small clusters adhering to vegetation or undersides of logs in deepest part of pond. Hatching larvae are a half-inch long; transform June to August or following summer.

■ Usually seen under logs or debris near pools.