

ENVIRONMENT

Rats with backpacks? Science, not Dr. Seuss

Tiny transmitters give endangered rodents a role to play in regional conservation project

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In the light of a round, bright moon, under a yellow-flowered bush, a young rattlesnake was no doubt enjoying its late-night snack of endangered rat until the biologists came near.

"I think it's eating one of my rats," said Mike Romich, who was followed by a colleague and a videographer on Tuesday as he checked traps in the dry, scrub- and boulder-filled Santa Ana River wash, a dark swath between the city lights of Highland and Redlands.

Kneeling on the sandy soil, they watched the snake swallow its meal in the bright light of video equipment and cellphone flashes. While nothing could be done for that particular rodent, the biologists' work in the wash that evening could help many more rats, not to mention 650,000 Inland residents who rely on water stored in the ground below.

The following morning, Romich would be looping backpack straps over the forelegs of seven luckier San Bernardino kangaroo rats picked for a study as part of an \$800,000 venture by the San Bernardino Valley Water Conservation District.

The Plunge Creek Conservation Project, \$500,000 of which is funded by a state grant, is geared to enhance groundwater storage in the wash while helping the species that live there.

Plunge Creek

The project seems simple: Dump a bunch of boulders in the creek bed and watch as the water from storms, currently stuck in a channel due to development upstream, fans out, depositing sand and sinking into the ground as it used to.

"We're setting the stage for nature to do the work," said Betsy Miller, land resources manager with the conservation district, as she explained the project while moving in and out of the moonlight and sparse shadows of yucca spikes and juniper trees, following Romich and his trap line.

The district's mission is to fill the Bunker Hill Groundwater Basin, which provides water for residents from Riverside to San Bernardino, Fontana to Redlands. To do that they need state and federal permits, and for those, they are required to help the endangered plants and animals found in these washes thrive on the land that's left.

"We have this place that is critical for groundwater recharge and critical for aggregate mining, and critical for rare, threatened and endangered species," Miller said later over the phone.

The trick is balancing the



WATCHARA PHOMICINDA — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Wildlife biologist Mike Romich identifies a San Bernardino kangaroo rat after retrieving it from a trap in the Santa Ana River between the cities of Highland and Redlands early Wednesday morning.

uses.

As part of a new wash plan, 1,500 acres are set aside for natural habitat, but it might be degraded by non-native grasses, trash or more.

"Acres cost money. Someone could have done something else with that. And so the acres that are being set aside for conservation, we need to wring every ounce of benefit out of them for the species," Miller said.

With Plunge Creek storm water slowed by boulders, more will sink into the ground for storage, and the fresh sand deposited over a wider area will be prime habitat for the kangaroo rat and other endangered inhabitants of the wash.

At least it should be.

Rat backpacks

Tracking will give the conservation district insight on how the construc-

tion of the boulder dams and the overall project affects the rats. It will also help officials learn the effectiveness of state and federal permit requirements designed to protect endangered plants and animals.

"My personal hope is that we will learn not only how this affects the kangaroo rats, but (once) we have done a project of this kind, we will know how to do it better next time," Miller said.

It will help the following projects to be faster, better and cheaper, she said.

Then, she added, "we can share it with partners, and it could be used anywhere people are working in these habitats across the southwest."

The kangaroo rat monitoring is expected to continue with different methods for five to 10 years, but

right now at least seven pint-sized rodents with pint-sized transmitter backpacks are hopping around the wash. On Wednesday, Romich said, he hoped to catch another 10 to add to the current study.

Debra Shier, a San Diego Zoo biologist who developed the transmitters, was helping Romich pull the straps over squirming rodents' small front legs with tweezers Wednesday morning at the district's office in Redlands.

The batteries in the tiny 1.1 gram packs only last six weeks, she said.

"The idea is to understand where they move, how they use their space at night, where they live, if they defend their burrows, and, whether in a project like this where there's an impact that needs to happen for a restoration purpose, if we move them out of that area of impact into another area where there are residents, how they interact," Shier said.

The transmitters, she said, won't harm any predators that find the study subjects.

In other projects, transmitters have been found in fecal matter after traveling through a snake's digestive tract, she noted.

"I tracked many of them to an old house, and it was an area where barn owls were living," she said. "So I found (the kangaroo rats') skulls, and I found their transmitters."

Ambassadors

In releasing the big-eyed, large-footed critters back into the wash with their little packs Wednesday night they seemed in no hurry to run away.

As one hopped off past cholla cactus and an endangered blue-flowered woolly-star bush, Romich pointed what looked like a 1980s aerial antenna into the dark. The handheld instrument started beeping.

"She's over there," he said pointing to the left of where she was last seen.

The rats' unique adaptations to live in the wash, such as getting their hydration from the insects and plants they eat so they don't have to drink water, make them "really incredible," Miller said.

"The species that we have here are so resilient, they've had a lot thrown at them," she said. "It doesn't rain here a lot, it's really warm, there's a lot of people, myself included, who love living here, so they're not alone, they're not in a pristine area."

The rats can serve as ambassadors to connect human residents to the natural world, "because this is our habitat, too," Miller said.

"They're adorable and they're feisty, and their whole natural history is how to survive in a place that we couldn't survive ... without a home," Miller said. "They're just meant to be there."

Angels

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documents," Molfetta's statement said. "It serves to undermine the basic tenet of our system of justice ... the dispassionate ascertainment of the truth. The irony of it is that the entity that chose to undermine the sanctity of the system did so in the hopes of promoting a narrative that obfuscates and misdirects. The truth is the truth, and it does not serve to preserve the image of any one particular baseball team."

The criminal complaint, which is a public record, details the DEA's findings as it relates to Kay and a victim the document identifies as "T.S.," who was found dead in a Southlake, Texas, hotel room on July 1, 2019.

According to the DEA, Kay had been supplying

fentanyl since 2017.

On the afternoon of July 1, police were called to investigate the body in the Southlake Hilton. Pills and a white substance were found in the room and they were sent for analysis that determined they contained fentanyl. The blue pills, marked M/30, are referred to as "blue boys."

The investigators also found text messages between Kay and Skaggs from the afternoon of June 30 in which Kay asked "Hoe (sic) many?" and Skaggs replied "Just a few like 5." Later that night, after hotel records indicated the two had entered their rooms in the Texas hotel, they texted each other again and arranged to meet.

The DEA affidavit concluded through its investigation that Kay had "a history of narcotic transactions, including several transactions wherein Kay

acquired oxycodone pills for T.S. and others from Kay's source(s) and distributed these pills to T.S. others. Kay had multiple contacts with some of these source(s) in the days leading up to and surrounding T.S.'s overdose death."

The DEA also reported that "several individuals who were associated with Kay and T.S. knew that Kay provided pills to T.S."

The Angels have consistently denied that the organization was aware either of Skaggs' drug use or that Kay had been involved. Kay told ESPN in October that former communications director Tim Mead and traveling secretary Tom Taylor were aware, but both denied having any knowledge.

The Angels indicated in a statement Friday morning that the organization had conducted its own investigation.

"We learned that there

was unacceptable behavior inconsistent with our code of conduct, and we took steps to address it," the statement said. "Our investigation also confirmed that no one in management was aware, or informed, of any employee providing opioids to any player, nor that Tyler was using opioids."

"As we try to heal from the loss of Tyler, we continue to work with authorities as they complete their investigation."

Skaggs' family has been waiting for the conclusion of investigations by the DEA and local law enforcement before deciding if they want to go forward with civil action, according to attorney Rusty Hardin, who is representing the family.

Hardin released a statement Friday urging the Angels to release the results of their investigation.

"The family is deeply heartbroken to learn that

Tyler would be alive today were it not for a pill containing fentanyl that was provided by the Director of Communications of the Angels," Hardin's statement said. "We note that the Angels say they commissioned an independent investigation that concluded no one in management was aware that a team employee was supplying illegal drugs to Tyler. We encourage the Angels to make that report public."

"We are relieved that no one else who was supplied drugs by this Angels executive met the same fate as Tyler. While nothing will replace the loss of Tyler, we are very grateful to federal prosecutors for their diligent and ongoing work."

The family could sue the Angels for wrongful death if they believe the organization was partially negligent in its treatment of Skaggs, contributing to his death.

Because California is a

proportional liability state, the family would only need to convince a jury that the Angels were partially liable for the death. The Angels then could be forced to pay the family a proportional amount of whatever damages a the courts deem appropriate.

Skaggs, who died just shy of his 28th birthday, spent most of his big league career with the Angels, including the last six years.

Months after his death, the Tarrant County Medical Examiner released autopsy results that showed that Skaggs had dangerous opioids fentanyl and oxycodone in his system, along with alcohol.

Skaggs' official cause of death was aspiration of stomach contents — he choked on his own vomit — but according to the DEA, the primary cause was the fentanyl.

"It was later determined that but for the fentanyl in T.S.'s system," the report said, "T.S. would not have died."

Coronavirus

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we did not make any progress today."

Republicans said Pelosi was relying on budget maneuvers to curb costs and contended she has overplayed her hand.

Often an impasse in Washington is of little consequence for the public — not so this time. It means longer and perhaps permanent expiration of a \$600 per-week bonus pandemic jobless benefit that's kept millions of people from falling into poverty. It denies more than \$100 billion to help schools reopen this fall. It blocks additional funding for virus testing as cases are surging this summer. And it denies billions of dollars to state and local governments considering furloughs as their revenue craters.

Ahead is uncertainty. Both the House and Senate have left Washington, with members sent home on instructions to be ready to return for a vote on an agreement. With no deal in sight, their absence raises the possibility of a prolonged stalemate that stretches well into August and even September.

President Donald Trump for now appears poised to go it alone, despite the considerable limits of that approach. Following through on earlier threats, Mnuchin said Trump will move forward with executive orders on home evictions and on student loan debt, and to permit states to repurpose COVID-19 relief funding



ANDREW HARNIK — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California, center right, and Senate Minority Leader Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York, center left, approach a statue of President George Washington shortly after meeting with Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and White House chief of staff Mark Meadows on Friday.

into their unemployment insurance programs. But a potential executive order to defer collection of Social Security payroll taxes has been shelved.

"This is not a perfect answer — we'll be the first ones to say that — but it is all that we can do, and all the president can do within the confines of his executive power," White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows said.

Friday's session followed a combative meeting on Thursday evening that

for the first time cast real doubt on the ability of the Trump administration and Democrats on Capitol Hill COVID-19 response bill. Pelosi summoned Mnuchin and Meadows in hopes of breathing life into the negotiations, which have been characterized by frustration and intransigence on both sides, particularly on top issues such as extending the bonus pandemic jobless benefit that expired last week.

Pelosi declared the talks all but dead until Meadows and Mnuchin give ground.

"I've told them, 'Come back when you are ready to give us a higher number,'" she said.

The breakdown in the negotiations is particularly distressing for schools, which have been counting on billions of dollars from Washington to help with the costs of reopening. But other priorities also are languishing, including a fresh round of \$1,200 direct pay-

ments to most people, a cash infusion for the struggling Postal Service and money to help states hold elections in November.

In a Friday news conference, Pelosi said she offered a major concession to Republicans.

"We'll go down \$1 trillion, you go up \$1 trillion," Pelosi said.

The figures are approximate, but a Pelosi spokesman said the speaker is in general terms seeking a "top line" of perhaps

\$2.4 trillion since the House-passed HEROES Act is scored at \$3.45 trillion.

Republicans say their starting offer was about \$1 trillion but have offered some concessions on jobless benefits and aid to states, among others, that have brought the White House offer higher.

Mnuchin said that renewal of a \$600 per-week pandemic jobless boost and huge demands by Democrats for aid to state and local governments are the key areas where they are stuck.

"There's a lot of areas of compromise," he said after Friday's meeting. "I think if we can reach an agreement on state and local and unemployment, we will reach an overall deal. And if we can't we can't."

State tops 10K deaths

California has surpassed 10,000 deaths from the coronavirus, making it the U.S. state with the third-highest deaths since the start of the pandemic.

The figure was reported Friday by Johns Hopkins University, with 10,171 dead since the outbreak began in California in February.

New York has the highest number of deaths at more than 32,000, followed by New Jersey with nearly 16,000. California is the nation's most populous state with 40 million people.

The first known COVID-19-related death in the U.S. occurred in early February in Santa Clara County. Nearly half of California's deaths are in hard-hit Los Angeles County, where more than 4,918 of its 10 million residents have died.