Nevada National Security Site

Plant and Animal Life

Introduction

A diverse and complex mosaic of plant and animal communities are found at the Nevada National Security Site. Representative of both the Mojave and Great Basin deserts, approximately 1,500 animal species, including 924 species of insects, and 750 different kinds of plants are documented at the site.

Kit foxes, not much larger than house cats, live in the open desert where they make their dens and hunt in sparsely vegetated habitats. They rely on speed and proximity to their dens for safety.

The varying elevations and climatic conditions at the test site contribute to the distribution of plant and animal communities. On the south end of the site, Jackass Flats lies at a low 2,688 feet above sea level while Rainier Mesa, in the north, rises to a high of 7,679 feet above sea level.

Nevada National Security Site animals

Coyotes, kit foxes, pronghorn antelope, desert tortoises, sidewinder snakes, bald eagles, kangaroo rats, and peregrine falcons are just a few of the more than 1,500 animal species found on the Nevada National Security Site. Invertebrates comprise the majority of animals on the site with approximately 1,200 species. Spiders, scorpions, beetles, centipedes, and ants are some of these species living on the test site.

Wild horses stop for water at the Nevada National Security Site. Approximately 30-40 wild horses currently live on the site.

About 30-40 wild horses live on or near Rainier Mesa in the northern part of the test site. Pronghorn antelope have been sighted from Mercury to Yucca Flat, and desert bighorn sheep are thought to be rare visitors on the test site. They have been seen in Mercury and on Rainier Mesa, but do not reside permanently anywhere on the site. Desert kangaroo rats are associated with loose, sandy soils at lower elevations while dark kangaroo mice stay near fine, gravel-like soils at higher elevations. The many natural springs, man-made ponds, and sewage lagoons attract a variety of migrating birds and waterfowl. The diversity of test site land and climate makes it an ideal home for many different types of animals.

Nevada National Security Site plants

In addition to the large variety of animal species, the Nevada National Security Site also boasts more than 750 varieties of plants. Because the site lies on the transition between the Mojave and Great Basin deserts, elements of both deserts are found in a diverse and complex flora. About 67 families of plants are represented, however, one-third of them belong to just three families: sunflowers, grasses, and buckwheats.

Joshua trees, a Yucca found in most southwestern states, are numerous in this area and are present on the test site in lower-middle elevations. Many of them are near 100 years old but are hard to age because they do not have annual growth rings like most trees. Juniper and pinyon grow at the higher elevations, especially on Rainier and Pahute Mesas where the elevation is more than 4,000 feet above sea level. Other vegetation present on the site include grasses, flowering desert plants, tumbleweed, sagebrush, and creosote, a bush characteristic of the Mojave Desert and dominant in the southern parts of the test site.

Native American use of plants at the Nevada National Security Site

Many of the plants on the Nevada National Security Site were used by Native Americans. Food and beverage plants, medicinal and ceremonial plants, and utilitarian plants were all part of the Native American way of life. Yuccas, such as Joshua trees, were important plants to Native Americans on the site. Not only were they used as a fiber source for baskets and as a source for soap, the flowers on Yucca plants are edible. Leafy plants provide yet another traditional source of food in the desert. Pahute Mesa offered several leafy food plants that were eaten as greens or added to other food. Mormon tea, common on the mesas of the test site, also had several uses. It was used to treat kidney ailments and also as an astringent. Its most prevalent use was for beverages such as tea.

Protected species

The desert tortoise is the only animal species commonly found on the Nevada National Security Site that is protected under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. It is listed as a threatened species, and the Nevada Field Office is required to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure that test site activities do not jeopardize the continued existence of the desert tortoise or destroy their habitat. Tortoises are found in the southern portion of the test site and extend north to the northern edges of Jackass Flat, Frenchman Flat and the small valleys that separate them. No threatened or endangered plant species are known to occur on the Nevada National Security Site.

The bristlecone pine is a multi-trunked tree, gnarled and twisted by the elements. Much of the pine is dead wood, whipped by sand and wind to create a smooth surface. Bristlecone pines can live for thousands of years - one of the oldest known trees is 4,789 years old.

Very common to the Nevada National Security Site, yucca trees grow low to the ground with sword-like leaves that end in a spear-like spine.

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