

Pygmy Rabbit Core Habitat in the Greater Hart-Sheldon

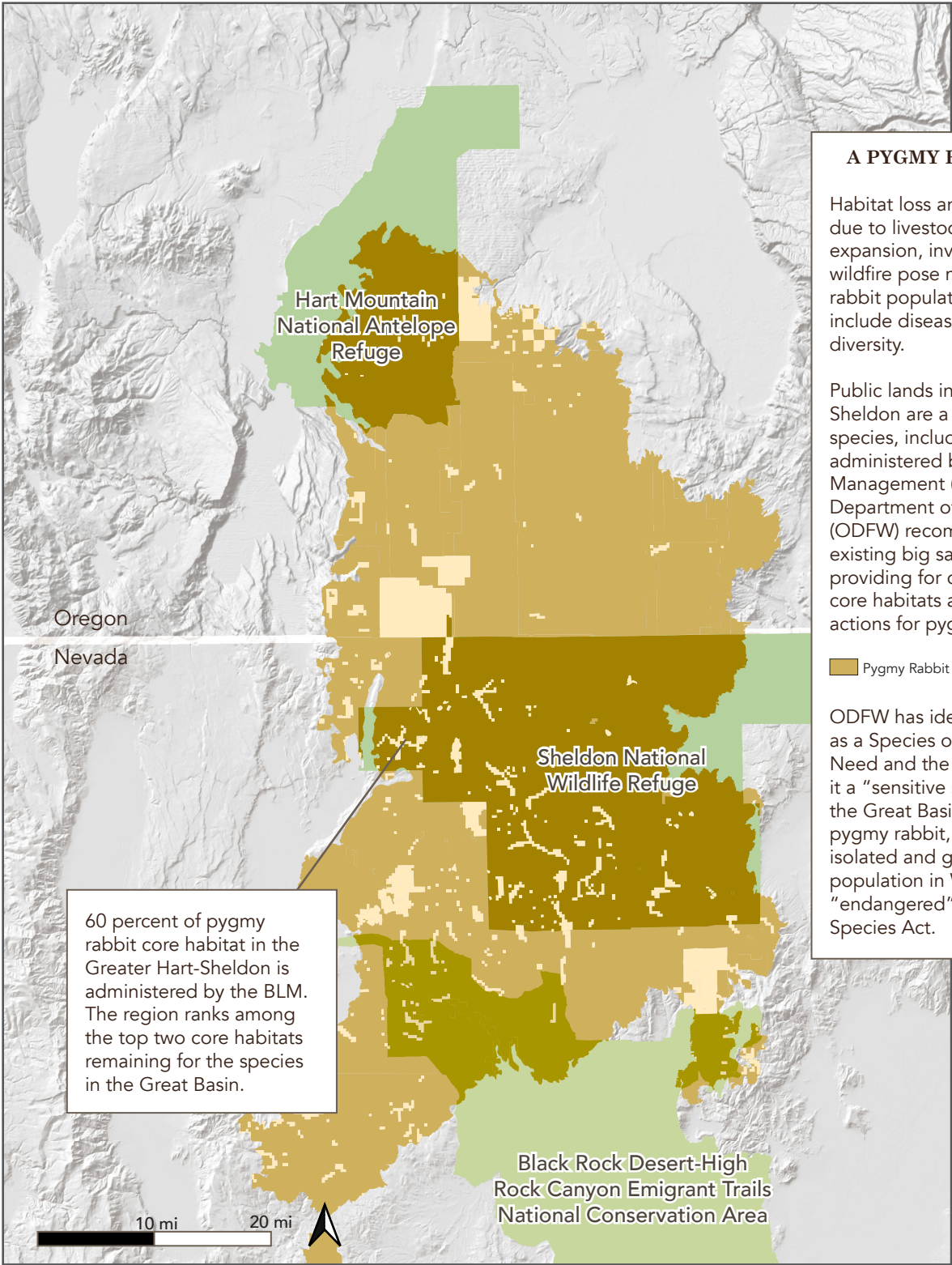
The Greater Hart-Sheldon is more than 3 million acres of sagebrush steppe anchored by Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge in southeastern Oregon and Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in northern Nevada. This vast expanse is also one of the most important core habitats for pygmy rabbits remaining in the West.

Pygmy rabbits, like sage-grouse and pronghorn, are a “sagebrush obligate” species, meaning they cannot survive without sagebrush. Pygmy rabbits require dense sagebrush with deep soils to dig their burrows. In winter, 99 percent of a pygmy rabbit’s diet is sagebrush.



Photo by Phil Mitchell

Pygmy Rabbit (*Brachylagus idahoensis*)



60 percent of pygmy rabbit core habitat in the Greater Hart-Sheldon is administered by the BLM. The region ranks among the top two core habitats remaining for the species in the Great Basin.

A PYGMY RABBIT PRESERVE

Habitat loss and fragmentation due to livestock grazing, juniper expansion, invasive grasses and wildfire pose major threats to pygmy rabbit populations. Other threats include disease and loss of genetic diversity.

Public lands in the Greater Hart-Sheldon are a refugium for the species, including huge expanses administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) recommends maintaining existing big sagebrush habitats and providing for connectivity between core habitats as key conservation actions for pygmy rabbits.

Pygmy Rabbit Core Habitat, BLM Public Lands

ODFW has identified pygmy rabbits as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need and the BLM has designated it a “sensitive species” throughout the Great Basin. The Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit, a geographically isolated and genetically distinct population in Washington, is listed as “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act.

Data sources

Dilts, T. 2022, March 4. Pygmy Rabbit Core Areas and Corridors. ArcGIS, <https://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=c49c977498954da498c7e3290e619512>.



Photo by Peter Lancaster

With adults weighing less than one pound, pygmy rabbits are North America’s smallest rabbit species. Despite their small stature, they’re the only rabbits that dig their own burrows.

WHAT IT WILL TAKE TO SAVE THIS SPECIES?

The Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit in Washington was considered extirpated until a captive breeding program restored a small population to the wild.

To avoid the same fate for Oregon’s pygmy rabbits population, we need to preserve intact, healthy sagebrush steppe ecosystems that are free of damaging human disturbances. Careful fire management in core pygmy rabbit habitat will also help maintain the large swathes of uninterrupted sagebrush they need to survive.