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Trying to net a rare butterfly

By Betsy Mason
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An endangered butterfly found only in a single spot in Antioch got a helping hand from biologists and volunteers Wednesday.

About a dozen scientists, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees, interns and volunteers, including a retired airline pilot, marched methodically, spaced 5 to 10 feet apart in a line, through the Antioch Dunes National Wildlife Preserve in search of the Lange's Metalmark butterfly.

Many of the volunteers wore shirts that said "Team LMB."

The plan was to cover the entire preserve, a 67-acre stretch of shrubby sand dunes sandwiched between warehouses, a gypsum plant and the San Joaquin River. The hope was to find 90 or more of the butterflies by the end of the day.

Several were captured to establish captive breeding colonies to help repopulate the preserve.

It was almost an hour before the first triumphant shout of "got one" rang out. The prize was an inch-sized, orange and black, white-spotted butterfly resting on a naked-stem buckwheat plant.

Because the butterfly lives no more than seven days as an adult, counts are made once a week from August through mid-September. Last week the count was 89.

The Lange's Metalmark butterfly has been on the endangered species list since 1976, but its numbers have been declining dramatically in recent years.

Last year 45 adults were counted in the preserve, down from the peak of more than 2,000 in 1999.

The preserve is also home to two endangered plants -- the Antioch Dunes evening primrose and the Contra Costa wallflower.

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The butterflies have a very limited range, which makes them vulnerable to habitat fragmentation.

"It doesn't have a long-distance flight plan," said Christy Smith, manager of the refuge. "Maybe 100 to 1,000 feet at best."

The butterfly became isolated in what is left of the dunes after much of the sand was built over or removed for use in construction of buildings.

"It used to extend all the way to the Mojave Desert from what I'm told," Smith said.

The Lange's Metalmark butterfly is completely dependent on the naked-stem buckwheat. It lays its eggs on the plant, grows into larvae and pupae and forms a chrysalis on the plant. When it emerges from the chrysalis as a butterfly, it feeds on the buckwheat's nectar.

But the buckwheat is struggling to compete with invasive grasses and plants on the preserve.

The non-native grasses have also made the area more prone to fires, which Smith suspects has also played a part in reducing the butterfly population. In 2005, 11 acres burned, and she estimates an average of four acres annually have burned during the past decade.

Stuart Weiss, a Menlo Park scientist studying nitrogen deposition, theorizes that nitrogen from nearby traffic is

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