



FORT UNION

Amphibians and Reptiles

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RESOURCE BRIEF

Importance

Amphibians and reptiles (herps) represent an important part of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. They eat a wide variety of invertebrate species, and, in turn, they are prey for many fish, bird, and mammal species. The American Southwest is well known for its abundance and diversity of reptiles. Although this region is less known for its amphibian populations, they too can be quite abundant in some habitats and are good indicators of environmental change due to their sensitivity to a variety of factors such as pollution, introduced species, drought, habitat destruction, and disease. Herp populations may be affected by these factors and exhibit measurable changes in site occupancy, distribution, abundance, and species richness.

Status and Trends

Fort Union National Monument (FONM), located on the southwestern edge of the Great Plains short-grass prairie, contains 720 acres of prairie habitat. Few inventories of the plants and animals in the park had been conducted prior to an inventory in 2001-2002. This project, conducted by the Museum of Southwestern Biology (MSB), provides baseline data for future inventory and monitoring.

During these surveys, nine amphibian and reptile species were documented. This is 27% of the species that appeared on a target list based on historical records, MSB records, and expert opinion. The four amphibian species recorded were: the tiger salamander (*Ambystoma tigrinum*), Great Plains toad (*Bufo cognatus*), Woodhouse toad (*Bufo woodhousii*), and



Tiger salamander

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bullfrog (*Rana catesbeiana*). The five reptile species were: short-horned lizard (*Phrynosoma douglasii*), racer (*Coluber constrictor*), coachwhip (*Masticophis flagellum*), bullsnake (*Pituophis catenifer*), and Western rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis*). All individuals were observed in grassland habitat, except for the bullfrog, which was observed in creek habitat (Wolf Creek proper is outside park boundaries). Other species are thought likely to occur based on MSB records (e.g., the lesser earless lizard [*Holbrookia maculata*]).

Discussion

Potential reasons for not recording more of the species that appear on the target list include weather and the sampling methods used. According to National Weather Service data, the area received only 57% of normal rainfall from January-September 2002; this probably affected activity of both reptiles and amphibians over the sampling period. The number of species detected was probably also reduced because pitfall traps and drift fences were not used (due to the archaeological sensitivity of the site).



Coachwhip

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Short-horned lizard

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