



MEDIA RELEASE

Endangered Butterfly Emerges After Big Alice Rains

An endangered butterfly rediscovered in central Australia after 35 years, is thought to be linked intimately to the recent summer rains.

Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts (NRETA) entomologist Dr Chris Palmer said he found a number of the butterflies while carrying out a targeted survey for the species in the Chewings Range, west of Alice Springs.

“The Desert Sand Skipper is a small, cryptic butterfly that is only found in the MacDonnell Ranges in the southern NT,” Dr Palmer said.

“The species is quite distinctive, once you know what to look for, distinguishable by its antennae and pattern of brown and yellow markings on the upper surface of both wings.”

Dr Palmer said others had looked for the endangered Desert Sand Skipper since it was last seen in 1972, but without success.

“I believe that the life cycle of this species is intimately related to summer rain, and the good rain we had in mid-January probably helped complete the lifecycle, allowing adults to emerge a few weeks later,” Dr Palmer said.

“I checked historical climate records before I went looking for the butterfly, and noticed that good rain fell a few weeks before adults were collected before both of the two previous collecting events (1966 and 1972).

“It’s possible that the unsuccessful surveys by others before me didn’t follow good rains and that adults may not emerge at all without good rain in summer or early autumn.”

Dr Palmer said one of the best things about moving to Alice Springs last year to become the first resident entomologist for NRETA is that he can time his surveys to maximise the chance of finding a particular species.

“Visitors to the area don’t usually have that luxury,” he said.

“Now that we have found the species, research will be ongoing, with many additional surveys being conducted throughout the MacDonnell Ranges to try to discover its distribution, as well as studies of the biology of the species, such as the period of adult activity.

“Important future work to be carried out includes finding out what the larvae look like, and what they may be feeding on”.

“Not only do I hope for more exciting discoveries of what invertebrates exist in the desert during my research in central Australia, but I also want to discover what aspects of the desert environment impact these animals.

“Many of the invertebrates here are totally different from other parts of Australia because they have to adapt to such an extreme environment.”

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“Long-term monitoring is important as such information could lead to indications of the effects climate change may have on all species, not just invertebrates.

Manager of the Threatened Species unit within Biodiversity Conservation Dr Chris Pavey remarked that the find of the endangered butterfly showed the value of having entomological expertise based in Alice Springs.

“Dr Palmer is the first entomologist to be working specifically on biodiversity conservation issues in the southern Northern Territory and his skills and expertise open up the possibility of many more exciting discoveries.”

Background information on the status of the species prior to the recent rediscovery is available at:

http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/wildlife/threatened/pdf/inverts/desert_sandskipper_EN.pdf

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Media Note – For more information contact Dr Chris Palmer 08 89518205. Photo available on request.

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