

# More than 700 species found

Created on Friday, 20 July 2012 10:26



BioBlitz volunteers spread out to study signs of life in the Pryor Mountains. Photo by Ginny Waples

## Bioblitz In The Pryors

By CAL CUMIN - *For The Outpost*

During the long drive through the Yellowstone and Clark Fork valleys south into the July sun, the temperature passes 90. Leaving the highway at the non-town of Warren and eventually ascending via Helt Road the southern side of Big Pryor Mountain, the heat tempers somewhat. At a relatively flat spot on the road before the latter gets really, really bad, Rocky Mountain College professor Kayhan Ostovar's 2012 BioBlitz is finally on the ground in the beautiful Pryor Mountains.

The temperature cools, the sky is clear, and a bright waxing moon promises a magical night with the scattered lights of northern Wyoming towns spread out below. The ground is covered with limestone rocks, and one is very glad to have a four-inch thick air mattress.

Tents are scattered all over the hillside wherever a bit of level, not too rocky ground can be found. Even finding a partially level place to park a truck and sleep where one won't slide out off the tailgate or scrunch up against the cab isn't easy. However, under this luminous sky and wrapped in silence, all is acceptable, and at five in the morning songbirds greet us and the new day.

A BioBlitz, first popularized by the internationally known naturalist, E.O. Wilson, is a gathering of biological scientists and their helpers who, over a period of 24 hours in a selected geographic area, inventory and document everything they can find in their particular area of expertise.

There are 80 people here, making up 15 taxonomic teams – experts in everything from flowers and plants to bats and bugs. Approximately 710 species are identified, and many more will be as boxes of alcohol-filled vials full of bugs gathered by sweep nets are sorted; those unknown or maybe entirely new species will be identified later at specialty labs in the region.

Jennifer Lyman, also from RMC, leads a large botany team, and Tony Burrows from Sheridan tracks and identifies bats via specialized sonic computer programs. Orty Bourquin from Columbus and retired from the South African Park Service is inventorying butterflies.

There are many others including Ralph Scott, the Nation's foremost othoptera (think grasshoppers) expert, Justin Runyon, Forest Service diptera expert (think flies), and Casey Delphia from Bozeman, an expert in hymenoptera (think bees).

The botanists identify 315 species of plants. Importantly to the area, about 100 different pollinators are inventoried. A species of bat new to the Pryors, *Myotis californicus*, is found as are more than 50 different spiders.

One little quirk is a tiger salamander wandering down the mountainside, a totally dry, rocky, dusty milieu. Someone even accuses the finder of having brought it to the area from somewhere else. It's transported later to a small wetland on the other side of the mountain.

A small pond, grimly opaque with a yellowish cast, high up on the mountain, is obviously a Mecca for wildlife – a great place for a trailcam to catch the owners of the many different tracks in the mud including bear, coyote, and squirrel. A pair of dark-eyed juncos venture from a nearby ponderosa for a drink.

Neither the Forest Service nor the Bureau of Land Management, which oversee the public lands in the Pryors, has the resources for the kind of intensive biodiversity analysis being done by this BioBlitz. Both agencies contributed to the cost of this effort as did the Pryors Coalition and the Montana Wilderness Association. Wall tents and fire fighting gear are also provided by the governmental agencies, which also have biologists, an archeologist, and a range specialist present as well as management personnel on-site.

Individual experts have studied the Pryors over time, but, with its rich and diverse ecology comprising life zones extending from desert to alpine, its secrets are barely touched. With traces of man going back thousands of years, it is also held sacred by Native Americans. The BioBlitz will contribute to the knowledge of this special area of Montana, and, with more knowledge, hopefully, more appreciation.

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