



Protecting the Spineless from Extinction

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STEVE INSKEEP, host: Honeybees used to be about the only bug anybody thought worth saving. Now one group is trying to protect even the insects you want to squash. NPR's John Nielsen has more.

JOHN NIELSEN: Scott Hoffman Black tends to stare at things that other people stay away from, like this bush near a wooded ditch not far from Davis, California.

Mr. SCOTT HOFFMAN BLACK (Director, Xerces Society): Got some bugs.

NIELSEN: We're not talking about butterflies and honeybees here. This bush crawls with flies, and with what I thought was a very small bumblebee.

Mr. BLACK: Actually, what you see is a very large fly. Hah!
(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. BLACK: We actually have a lot of flies that mimic bees.

NIELSEN: Black runs the country's leading and only bug protection group, the non-profit Xerces Society based in Portland, Oregon. In that capacity, he's constantly explaining why insects, like the syrphid flies – buzzing all around this bush - are more important than a lot of people think. As it happens, Black says, syrphid fly larvae feast on rose-killing aphids.

Mr. BLACK: Often rearing up like a lion after it gets its prey, holding the aphid and waving it around, and then just chomping it down.

NIELSEN: Until a few years ago, the Xerces Society fought only on behalf of butterflies, but Black says times have changed. Now he fights for beetles found in carcasses, and snails so small that 20 of them will fit on your pinky finger. We protect the **spineless**, he explains with pride.

Mr. BLACK: We see ourselves as equal opportunity, anything without a backbone.

NIELSEN: Bug protectors need to have a sense of humor, he says. Otherwise they won't survive the disbelieving snorts they often hear at public meetings, or those stupid jokes about the need for bumper stickers that say things like, Save the Syrphid Fly.

Mr. BLACK: I can't just go in and say okay, here's the Salt Creek Tiger Beetle, let's protect it. I have to go in and say here's the Salt Creek Tiger Beetle, it's important for all these reasons.

NIELSEN: The Salt Creek Tiger Beetle is just one of the endangered bugs the Xerces Society has already helped protect, by campaigning to save some of the marshes it lives in, in Nebraska. The group has also got broader programs up and running, including one that's turning golf courses into bug havens.

Mr. SEAN HOOLEHAN (Golf Course Superintendent, Wild Horse Resort/President, Golf Course Supervisors Association of America): And the idea was and is, to kind of identify how golf course support not just golfers, but animals, plants, and insects.

PALCA: Sean Hoolehan is the golf course superintendent at the Wild Horse Resort in Pendleton, Oregon, and the president of the Golf Course Supervisors Association of America. Several years ago, after meetings with Xerces, he filled the unused portion of his course with native plants and with some other unusual items that bugs like.

Mr. HOOLEHAN: I've had some old stumps brought in. And then I've actually had guys go and drill holes into the stumps to even make more of a good nesting location.

NIELSEN: He says golfers love the wild buggy look. But in other places, Scott Black's bug protection efforts haven't been so well received. One of these spots is the town of Colton in Southern California. There, a prime piece of downtown real estate cannot be developed, because it holds the last of the Delhi Sands flower-loving flies. They happen to be the only flies on the Federal Endangered Species List.

Laurie Pierson-Cripe, one of the owners of that unused real estate, says the Delhi Sands flower-loving fly is pretty unpopular in Colton. To prove that point, residents have carried giant fly swatters to public meetings devoted to the insect. She says she sometimes hears bitter jokes about killing off all the flies with pesticides some dark night.

Ms. LAURIE PIERSON-CRIPE (Resident): Believe me, it's crossed our minds. Although, that's a felony and we don't want to land in jail.

PALCA: Scott Black of the Xerces Society says this backlash happened because the government waited too long to protect the Delhi Sands flower-loving fly. He says it's his job to speak for other **spineless** creatures while they're still relatively common.

John Nielsen, NPR News, Washington.

INSKEEP: It's NPR News.

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