

Endangered butterfly lab at Coffee Creek Prison nurtures insects and inmates

by Stuart Tomlinson, KATU News | Wednesday, July 19th 2017



Inmate Caroline Exum explains the life cycle of the Taylor's checkerspot butterfly in the prison's lab. (KATU)



VIEW PHOTO GALLERY

 7 photos

WILSONVILLE, Ore. — Shrinking habitat, lack of specific plants, and pesticides are reducing the native populations of several Oregon butterflies, perhaps most in danger is the [Taylor's checkerspot](#).

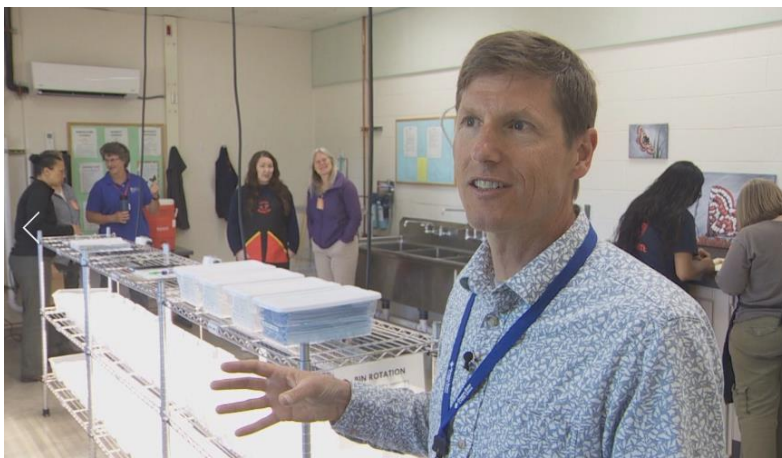
Now, an inmate program at [Coffee Creek Correctional Institution](#) for women seeks to increase their numbers.

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At Coffee Creek inmates are not only rearing the endangered Taylor's checkerspot butterfly through five stages to a brief 14 to 21 days as an adult butterfly, they're raising the plants where they exclusively lay their eggs.

“Give them a chance to have higher survival from the egg stage through caterpillars, so that we can create lots of butterflies that can be put back into the wild,” said Tom Kaye of [Oregon's Institute for Applied Ecology](#). “Also, here at Coffee Creek, we manage a native plant nursery that inmates run and they produce literally tens of thousands of plants that are used then to restore habitats to the wild in our state.”

Kaye said the Taylor's checkerspot can only be found in two places in Oregon's Benton County.



Tom Kaye of the Institute for Applied Ecology talks in the butterfly lab. Photo: KATU

Their survival depends on creating additional habitats for them to thrive. Other endangered butterflies include the Fender's blue butterfly and the Oregon silverspot, which lives on Oregon coastal grasslands like Cascade Head.

“In order to turn that around, we're going to have to restore populations, restore habitat and move butterflies from a captive rearing facility like this back into the wild,” Kaye said.

With the help of a grant from the Oregon Zoo and assistance from U.S. Fish & Wildlife, the lab at Coffee Creek opened in April when the first egg clusters were dropped off. Inmate technicians will raise the eggs to the caterpillar and then the pupation stage. The pupas will then be moved to protected habitats.

For inmates it's a chance to learn new skills and give back to the community.

“One of things that I've gained that I didn't expect to gain: that we have also been able to nurture plants in our lab,” said inmate Caroline Exum. “And I've been incarcerated going on my 19th year, and I have not been able to touch the plants and the soil for a very long time. Being part of this program makes us a part of our community here and a part of our world.”

Kaye says the program is all part of the [Sustainability in Prisons Project](#), which seeks to bring nature and science education into prisons.

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“The other part of it is we are working with a population that's vastly underserved in our state to give them vocational skills, lecture series and habitat and habitat conservation,” Kaye said.

The Coffee Creek Correctional Institution in Wilsonville houses 1,200 inmates in both minimum and medium security facilities.