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Environmental Warfighter Interns train at JBLM checkerspot

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The prairies on Joint Base Lewis-McChord in the springtime are beautiful sites — everything blooms in May. Active-duty interns have the opportunity to work with biologists stationed at JBLM, participating in plant and wildlife species surveys, oak prairie restoration and ecological research.

In March the Environmental Warfighter program had an opportunity to participate in the Taylor's checkerspot release.

To protect endangered species like the butterfly, Taylor's checkerspot, the military takes a surprising role in its support for restoring habitat, building partnerships and contributing tirelessly to the efforts of sustaining training lands.

As home to one of the rarest ecosystems in the country, JBLM plays an active role in helping to recover endangered species. Historically the South Puget Sound prairie landscape, used to extend from just south of Tacoma to the Chehalis River southwest of Oakville but 98 percent of that landscape has been converted to other uses like housing development and agriculture.

The prairie supplies a unique composition of porous soil formed from glacial outwash, drought conditions and Native American fires that were set to maintain the grasslands for hunting and maintaining plant food resources. This gravelly outwash provides habitat for several species, both plant and animal, that are rare and in danger of extinction.

Joint Base Lewis-McChord protects vital test and training mission through a partnership dedicated to promoting natural resource sustainability.

The Taylor's checkerspot is listed as endangered under both state and federal law. The population of this species has declined greatly with the loss of prairie habitat in the region and the spread of non-native invasive plants. Its protection and recovery requires the participation of many partner agencies and organizations working together.

JBLM has been working with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Center for Natural Lands Management and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and others to preserve and restore habitat, both on and off JBLM, so that the butterfly population can recover.

Chief Warrant Officer 3 Matt Rainey is retiring from the Army. His undergraduate degree is in biology, and his Army career has been as an intelligence officer assigned to I Corps staff. Rainey wants to find civilian work in the natural sciences, to that end he is taking the opportunity to intern with Environmental Warfighter program, offered through Directorate of Public Works' Environmental Division, Fish and Wildlife branch and Colorado State University's Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands.

He is the 62nd active-duty service member to take this opportunity to participate in habitat restoration, rare species conservation and ecological science.

"I'm looking at a tough (job) market, but now I have something to put on my resume that I wouldn't otherwise have had," Rainey said.

In March, the team placed five hungry Taylor's checkerspot caterpillars on a preidentified host plant. The training area had been prepped and restored, biologists and interns putting in over six years of work removing non-native scots broom brush using prescribed fire and brush cutters as well as planting native plants important for this butterfly.

Berry baskets were placed over the top of English plantain, to act as a sunroom and warm up the larvae. The checkerspot host plants historically include harsh and golden paintbrush — also an endangered species and difficult to find — so biologists opt for the readily

available plantain.

Taylor's checkerspot uses a variety of species as nectar sources including camas, balsamroot and spring gold. This springtime flyer is one of the more colorful prairie butterflies.

It achieves its lovely black, white and orange checkerspot pattern after progressing through 5-6 caterpillar stages — called instars — molt, get bigger, molt again until it pupates and emerges to become an adult butterfly. The butterflies are likely to be out in force in May.

“It’s been a great experience and a good opportunity to reset as I transition out,” Rainey said. “It’s good for wounded warriors, the Warrior Transition Battalion and those who are retiring. Eco-therapy, what’s not to love about going out in the woods every day?”

For more information about becoming a sustainability intern, send an email to usarmy.jblm.imcom.list.dpw-edpr@mail.mil or visit the JBLM sustainability facebook page.

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