

Animals in drought-stricken West dying for water

By Darryl Fears, Washington Post

For the giant kangaroo rat, death by nature is normally swift and dramatic: a hopeless dash for safety followed by a blood-curdling squeak as their bellies are torn open by eagles, foxes, bobcats and owls.

They're not supposed to die the way they are today – emaciated and starved, their once abundant population dwindling to near nothing on California's sprawling Carrizo Plain, about 100 miles northwest of Los Angeles, where the drought is turning hundreds of thousands of acres of grassland into desert.

Without grass, long-legged kangaroo rats cannot eat. And as they go, so go a variety of threatened animals that depend on the keystone species to live. "That whole ecosystem changes without the giant kangaroo rat," said Justin Brashares, an associate professor of wildlife ecology and conservation at UC Berkeley.

Endangered kangaroo rats are just one falling tile in the drought's domino effect on wildlife in the lower Western states. Large fish kills are happening in several states as waters heated by higher temperatures drain and lose oxygen. In Northern California, salmon eggs have virtually disappeared as water levels fall. Thousands of migrating birds are crowding into wetlands shrunk by drought, risking the spread of disease that can cause huge die-offs.

As the baking Western landscape becomes hotter and drier, land animals are being forced to seek water and food far outside their normal range. Herbivores such as deer and rabbits searching for a meal in urban gardens in Reno are sometimes pursued by hawks, bobcats and mountain lions. In Arizona,

rattlesnakes have come to Flagstaff, joining bears and other animals in search of food that no longer exists in their habitat.

“You think about it. In our urban environments, we have artificial water. We’re not relying on creeks,” said David Catalano, a supervisory biologist for the Nevada Department of Wildlife.



A Tahoe coyote. Photo/LTN file