

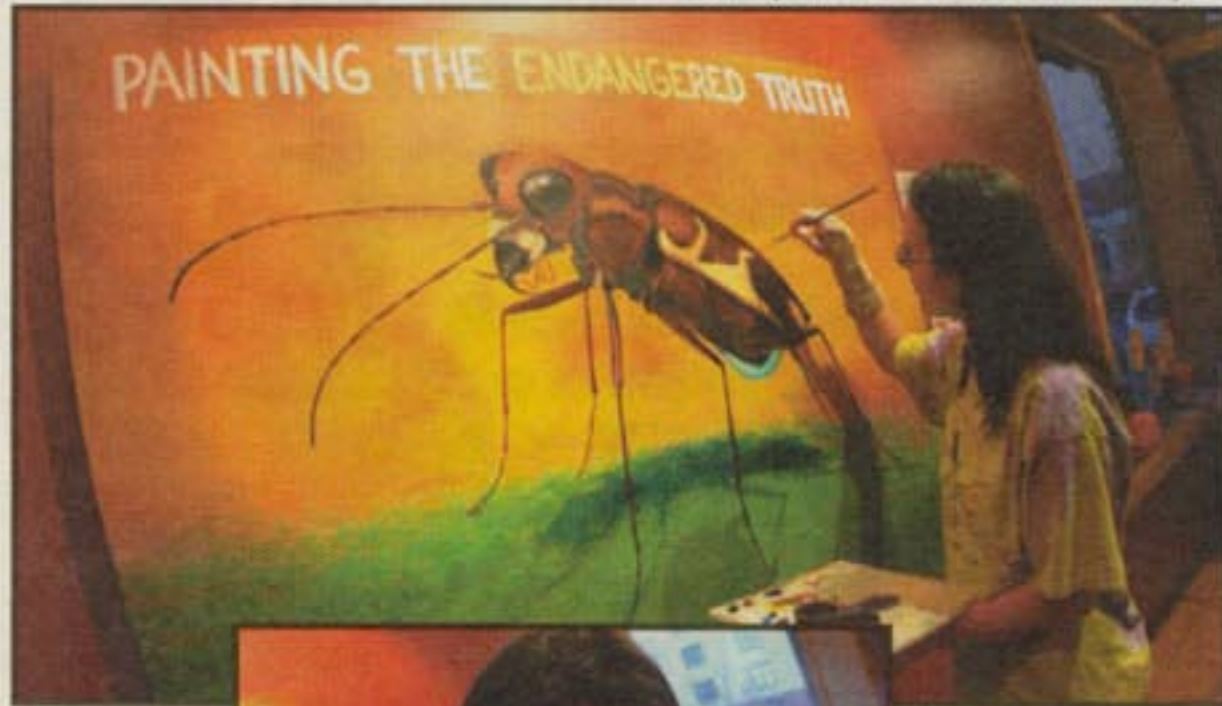


Beetle Jess

By Leah Andrews

Artist, entomologist team up to protect rare Nebraska beetle

It is tiny, its home is confined to a small, unique area of Lancaster County and it has plenty of people feeling passionately about its survival, one way or



Jessa Huebing-Reiting

the other. What is it? It's the rare – and nearly extinct – Salt Creek tiger beetle.

While clinging desperately to survival, the little beetle has gained some pretty big supporters, including University of Nebraska-Lincoln entomologists, artists, concerned citizens and media professionals.

Featured in the latest installment of Project InSECT's (International Spectrum of Enormous Crawling Things) large-scale, insect-based performance paintings, the Salt Creek tiger beetle's fans are hop-

ing to attract attention to its plight in a big way.

"I talk and paint in front of an audience while my husband, James, educates," said Project InSECT artist, Jessa Huebing-Reiting. "It's a total team effort to reach people about the beauty of insects."

"There's a huge prejudice about my subjects and battling those prejudices is part of the fun in what I do. I get people to look more closely and see how beautiful insects are and change their perception. Up until now, I had been painting

insects who were doing OK."

That's until Huebing-Reiting met Dr. Leon Higley, professor of entomology at UNL, at a conference in Kansas City.

"All entomologists want me to paint their insect because they all believe their insect is the best," Huebing-Reiting said. "Leon mentioned that these beetles were an endangered species in Nebraska and we already knew we were coming to Omaha to work at the zoo, so it seemed like the perfect opportunity to break forward and do something with more meat and potatoes to it."

"It was our chance to affect a community and make an impact. Unfortunately, we were expecting a bigger response and support from the zoo, so while we still do other work there we have moved the tiger beetle painting to CappuGino's downtown and the Hot Shops. It's amazing to see the response we've gotten – from kids, from zoo workers and from a variety of people, including a local TV newscaster."

Huebing-Reiting's subject is one of the most rare insects and it is found only in the saline wetlands near Lincoln. The beetle has an adult lifespan from the end of May to mid-to-late July and its larvae burrows in soil the rest of the year, waiting for prey to walk by.

Its habitat has given the beetle the ability to shut down its metabolism and perform something like anaerobic respiration in order to survive completely submerged for 14 to 15 days during flood season. Large eyes on a manhole-cover type head and hooks on its back to anchor itself to its burrow will all be captured in the artist's larger-than-life portrait.

When the 50-inch by 66-inch painting of "Terie" the tiger beetle is done, Huebing-Reiting said she plans to continue seeking out other endangered insects as subjects.

"We lose species every day and people tend to say 'it's just a bug,' but once a bug is gone it affects everything up the food chain," she said. "The tiger beetle's plight gave me more of a passion to go headlong into these issues and have an impact in the future."

"There's a society in Oregon that does research on endangered invertebrates, so we're going to Portland when we're done with 'Terie' at the end of November."

While many view insects as insignificant or something to be squashed, Dr. Higley said the decline of an insect species doesn't bode well for nature.

"The Salt Creek tiger beetle is just like the eagle of the insect world because it's a predator," he said. "It's an indication of the destruction of an entire habitat – if the eagle or the tiger beetle isn't doing well, the ecosystem is not doing well."

The Salt Creek tiger beetle isn't alone in its struggle to persevere in its small habitat. A number of other insects and plants are only associated with the saline wetlands, which is considered to be the most unique habitat type in the eastern Great Plains.

"The saline wetlands have black soil that is rich in salt left over from when Nebraska had an inland sea," Higley said. "When water comes percolating to the surface now, it deposits salts on the surface of the soil."

"It's kind of pretty because if you look at the salt flats the salt has unique crystals like snowflakes and fills in along the cracks in the soil. It's also like a mini desert because the black soil and salt mix create an environment that is 120 to 130 degrees on the surface."

Because of the unusual qualities of the saline wetlands, many plants and animals have had to adapt to it.

"Plants have adapted to have smaller leaf surface area and can store amounts of salt in their leaves to draw water into the plant," Higley said. "It's interesting from a scientific standpoint to see the unique adaptations of insects and plants and we can learn a lot from the habitat."

"However, over the last 50 years most of the saline habitats have been destroyed. What's left is quite fragmented and is widely scattered over the Great Plains. The decline of the beetle reflects the destruction of that habitat."

When Higley started looking at the beetle 11 years ago, it had absurdly low numbers for an insect.

"When you consider that it's common to find a half-million insects of one species in a cornfield, it was shocking to find an entire species of less than 1,000 beetles," he said. "Before this I would have said it was not possible to sustain a species on a population this small. While other insects on the endangered list have populations of 10,000 in multiple loca-



tions, the Salt Creek tiger beetle has numbers of 500 to 600 and is contained to one area in the world – three small sites in Lancaster County, Neb."

It's not unexpected to see a population at one particular site be wiped out and then re-colonize elsewhere. However, the beetles have nowhere else to go because all other similar habitats are gone.

"It would take just one bad weather situation and the species would be wiped out entirely," Higley said. "Ninety percent of the larvae habitat is unprotected and we're not allowed on the land to research or protect them because the larval burrow land is owned by private millionaire developers."

"What's going on with this habitat is what I call our version of Chinatown. The 50-year development plan for the city does not show development in the area at the North 27th street interchange of Interstate 80 – which is where the saline wetlands are – because there's no usable water and it's in a flood plain, yet commercial developers are buying the land."

"There's no reason to develop the land because Lincoln has no natural barriers like a river or mountain range to prevent development elsewhere. Why should there even be a controversy? Where the beetles occur is where the city of Lincoln has already said it doesn't want to be."

The tiger beetle's habitat is restricted to a 200-foot stretch along the west

bank of Little Salt Creek and 150-by-50-foot areas near Arbor Lake, a site that is already protected thanks to collaboration between the city, the Game and Parks Commission and the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The beetle is also listed as a state endangered insect, so it is already illegal to do things to their habitat," Higley said. "But without a federal endangered listing, it's impossible to compete for any of the \$80 million set aside for recovery, land acquisitions, education and preservation."

"It's frustrating because what is on paper to happen and what actually happens is radically different. The area is at risk and there's nothing that we can do to prevent it with the limited resources we have now. I'm sure

if it was a pretty bird we were trying to save, it would be different."

It may not be a pretty bird, but to those who love it, the tiger beetle is beautiful. Aside from aesthetics, Higley said there are many reasons to save the beetle.

Huebing-Reiting and her husband will keep educating people on rare insects and will take Project InSECT across the country. For the month of November, the couple and "Terie" will be performing on Mondays and Tuesdays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturdays from 2 to 5 p.m. at the Hot Shops, and from 5:30 to 9 p.m. on Wednesdays and Thursdays and from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturdays at CappuGino's in the Old Market. ☺

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