

Green Scene: A Tale of Two Owls

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The northern spotted owl is probably BC's most celebrated and debated endangered species. That's because this medium sized-owl absolutely requires large tracts of coastal old-growth forests for its survival. This has put its habitat needs on a collision course with the forestry industry which has forcefully resisted efforts by government to set aside undisturbed forests for owl habitat.

This somewhat secretive owl with gorgeous dark brown eyes is strictly nocturnal. They are rather fastidious regarding their diet and focus on catching bushy-tailed woodrats (i.e., packrats), northern flying squirrels and southern red-backed voles. They tend to pair for life. A breeding pair can require at least 3600 hectares or more of low-elevation old-growth coastal forests to successfully raise their young. In Canada, they are found only in the southwest corner of mainland BC. Because their favorite prey items, i.e., woodrats, flying squirrels and voles are not found on Vancouver Island, these owls have never nested on Vancouver Island.

At one time, BC was considered to support at least 500 pairs of spotted owls. Their prime habitat was probably the old-growth forests of the lower Fraser Valley now long converted to farms and cities. Possibly, you are living on what was once prime spotted owl habitat; I know that I am. When I moved to BC in 1989, spotted owls still resided not far away on the north shore mountains within the old-growth forests of Metro Vancouver's three drinking watersheds. I was pleased when efforts to stop logging in these watersheds were successful because it meant that remaining old-growth forests would continue to provide critical habitat for species, such as spotted owls. Efforts by the provincial government to protect old-growth forests in the Fraser Valley have been far less successful. While a number of spotted owl "recovery plans" have been developed since the mid-1990s, these plans have all been flawed by allowing some logging within prime old-growth areas. The number of spotted owls, thought to be around 100 pairs in the wild in 1989, has now dwindled alarmingly to only a half dozen pairs...or less.

Barred owls are very similar in appearance to spotted owls with the exception of the markings on their breast, which are more like vertical bars than spots.

B. Brandhorst photo.

And then, the barred owls arrived. Barred owls are actually ancient cousins of spotted owls and can interbreed with them but rarely do. These owls are slightly larger, more aggressive and far less selective about what they eat and the type of forests in



which they nest. For thousands of years, barred owls and spotted owls had been kept separate by the wide swath of prairie and desert which lies between the eastern and western forests of North America. Then, people came along, established cities and planted trees which created ideal habitat for barred owls and provided plenty of opportunities for them to catch the Norway rats that inevitably follow people wherever they live.

Around the time of World War II, barred owls were just establishing their first foothold in northern BC. The logged and immature forests throughout BC proved to be ideal habitat for them. By 1969, these owls were nesting in Surrey. Vancouver Island also proved to be popular with these owls; in the 1970s, barred owls continued to expand their range south into the USA. In 1976, prominent bird biologists in BC expressed concerns about the fate of spotted owls when they stated, "It seems doubtful that two species so similar in general food habits and habitat requirements could coexist in the same areas for very long". They were so right. As the population of barred owls increased significantly in the past few decades, they chased spotted owls from the few remaining patches of old-growth forest. The barred owls have also proved to be similarly disastrous for the smaller western screech owls which essentially disappeared from local forests within a few short years.

Biologists are now faced with a conundrum. While there are efforts to protect the few remaining spotted owls that remain in the wild as well as establish a captive breeding program, it is clear that barred owls must be removed from forests if the spotted owls are to nest successfully and survive. However, a controversial proposal to kill barred owls to help spotted owls has met with resistance from the public. Obviously, barred owls can be captured and removed from spotted owl territory and then located elsewhere but this requires more effort and, thus, costs more money. Due to tight budgets, provincial biologists are feeling pressured to take the proverbial "cheap shot" which would produce the same benefit for spotted owls. Hopefully, wisdom will prevail and the right decision will be made. What would your choice be?