

Green Scene: A Tale of Two Owls

by Elaine Golds

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[photograph]

[caption: A barred owl, a species that was first observed in the Lower Mainland in 1966 and, since then, has spread quickly across all of southern B.C.

Kiyoshi Takahashi photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: A tale of two owls]

Owl attacks at Mundy Park recently provoked a flurry of letters to the editor. Hopefully, these juvenile barred owls have now learned that the bald heads and ponytails of humans do not make appetizing snacks. To add insult to injury, these owls are unnatural aliens in our British Columbian forests. Once restricted to eastern coniferous forests, barred owls are believed to have moved along the boreal forest fringe of the prairie provinces to northern BC in the 1940s. There, they then moved south as humans, equipped with chainsaws, created the fragmented forests they prefer as habitat.

Barred owls were first observed in the lower mainland in 1966 and, since then, have spread quickly across all of southern BC. While they are considered to fill a somewhat similar ecological niche to our native spotted owl, there are striking behavioural differences between them that help to account for one of these owls becoming highly endangered while the other has turned into a successful invader. Both owls are of similar size, about 45 cm in height, with barred owls tending to be a little larger. The two species can interbreed which implies they have a common ancestor. Barred owls are not only more aggressive but also are much more flexible in their preferences for food and habitat.

Spotted owls, now considered to be in imminent danger of extirpation (i.e., disappearance from Canada), are highly specialized. For habitat, they require old growth forests preferably 200 years or older in age. Of course, most of these forests have now been logged. For food, spotted owls in BC rely mainly on flying squirrels and bushy-tailed woodrats (i.e., packrats). Barred owls also prey upon these two species plus a wide variety of small mammals, birds and amphibians. Consequently, a pair of spotted owls requires 3400 hectares of older forest to raise a family while a pair of barred owls can make do with only 300 hectares of a forested mix of mature trees, clear-cuts and anything in between.

Two hundred years ago, the Tri-Cities area would have been ideal spotted owl habitat. At that time, it is thought that as many as a thousand spotted owls resided in the south-western corner of mainland BC. These owls also utilized old growth forests further south in Washington and Oregon - and still do, although in much smaller numbers than historic levels. Interestingly, spotted owls were never found on Vancouver Island. Their absence there has been attributed to the absence of flying squirrels and bushy-tailed woodrats, their favourite prey. The lack of these two menu items proved no impediment to barred owls. Three years after they were observed in Surrey, barred owls arrived in Victoria in 1969 and now flourish throughout Vancouver Island.

Given that spotted owls require such a large home range (which supports dozens of other old-growth dependent species) and the few remaining suitable forests are now widely spaced between clear-cuts and younger forests, it's probably close to impossible for young owls to find a mate and breed successfully. Sadly, the most recent survey indicates only 17 spotted owls remain in BC and, of these, only 12 comprise breeding pairs. Surely, there is an imperative need for government to take immediate action to protect these few remaining owls.

However, it is not really appropriate to blame the demise of spotted owls on barred owls when it has been the human hand on the landscape that has created habitat conditions more suitable for them. Locally, barred owls have been observed or heard in sites such as Minnehada Park, Mundy Park and the Riverview Hospital grounds as well as forested areas along Hyde Creek and the Coquitlam River. Hearing their characteristic "who cooks for you" call can certainly add an eerie thrill to an evening stroll but you may be well advised to wear a hard hat for such outings.