



(Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

The poor spotted owl has been a source of controversy for a long time. They have been the center of a debate that has turned political. Northern spotted owls were federally listed as threatened in 1990 and their standing has not improved.

While timber interests and conservatives have cited the northern spotted owl as an example of excessive or misguided environmental protection, many environmentalists view the owl as an indicator species, or canary in a coal mine whose preservation has created protection for an entire ecosystem.

There are 3 species of spotted owls in the world. The northern spotted owl, who is the center of the most current controversy, lives from northern California to British Columbia. The California spotted owl resides only in California and is a lighter color with larger spots.

The 3rd species occasionally is seen here in Colorado. The Mexican spotted owl occurs in forested mountains and canyonlands throughout the southwestern U.S. and Mexico. It ranges from Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and the western portions of Texas, and south into Mexico.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

The new player in this battle is the barred owl, one of the larger species of owls. They are more common to the Eastern U.S., but they do make appearances in Colorado from time to time, especially in the southeastern corner.

The barred owl has been doing very well, unlike the poor spotted owl. The barred owls are doing so well, they have invaded the Pacific Northwest. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has listed the barred owls as an invasive species in the Pacific Northwest because they originated in the U.S. East Coast, and are now threatening the native protected species, including the northern spotted owls. Confused? Hang on, it gets better.

Barred owls are among North America's most common owls. They are distributed throughout Canada and the United

States, with separate populations in Mexico. They prefer large, unbroken tracts of forest, though they occur in smaller, heavily treed forests.

Due to their need for nesting cavities, they prefer old-growth forest. Currently, they are expanding their range into the Pacific Northwest, and with this expansion have begun to hybridize with their smaller, critically endangered cousin, the spotted owl.

The barred owls have been in the Pacific Northwest since the 1950s, and they now outnumber northern spotted owls across Washington, Oregon, and California. The barred owls now number over 100,000 in the northern spotted owl's territory. They are slowly moving south and into California, the territory of California's spotted owls, who are also facing population declines.

The barred owls pose a threat to the spotted owls because they are more aggressive, are much larger, and have a more varied diet, eating anything not nailed down, including insects, frogs, fish, and even other birds.

The barred owls are more territorial than the native spotted owls, meaning they will displace them, disrupt their nesting, compete with them for available food,

and attack them whenever they get to close.

In areas where the interloping barred owls have taken up residency, the spotted owls populations are rapidly declining. Already listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, their populations have declined by 35 to 80 percent over the past 20 years.

In a recent story in *Newsweek*, Jeffrey R. Dunk, a conservation lecturer at Humboldt State University stated, "They have a dramatic impact on northern spotted owl populations. A recent study found spotted owl populations in areas that received experimental barred owl control (removal) declined at an average rate of 0.2 percent per year, whereas populations in areas that did not receive barred owl control declined at an average rate of 12.1 percent per year."

It is very clear the poor spotted owl cannot survive without some type of intervention. However, the proposal presented by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has really thrown new fuel to the already burning political fire. The USFWS wants hunters to shoot more than half a million barred owls to help protect the other native species.

As part of a draft management plan, not final yet, the USFWS wants

to cull these invasive owls, and hopes to enlist trained specialists to shoot 500,000 of them over the next 30 years. Starting in 2025, the plan is to cull 20,000 owls in the first year, followed by 13,397 birds a year in the first decade, followed by 16,303 a year in the second decade, and 17,390 birds a year in the third decade.

The plan calls for landowners to apply for a permit to kill the owls' using shotguns, and substituted with capture and euthanasia when people are too close for the shooting. The plan hopes to eradicate around 30 percent of the total barred owl population, which they believe will take the pressure off the spotted owls.

Many conservation groups are blowing a gasket over this plan. While I will not take a political stand on the issue, as an ethical hunter and sportsman, I have a problem whenever we decide to kick old Mother Nature in the teeth because we think we are smarter than her. I am not convinced the barred owls are really interlopers, considering they have moved there through a natural course, without any help from man. I do understand that we need to do something to help the spotted owl.

I am also concerned with a bunch of "specialists" taking to the woods

to shoot owls. I have hunted all my life, probably more than most folks, and am not sure how you become an owl specialist. I guess it is akin to varmint control, but I don't think you will see many hunters getting in line for the job.

If this logic were to hold true, we would need to start culling mountain lions, because they are clearly impacting the deer populations in many areas. Same to be said about wolves, and why are we introducing them to an already threatened game population. Seems like we are wearing all kinds of hats in the debate without really looking at the big picture. In any event, stay tuned, because this is sure going to heat up and throw many more questions on the table before it is over.

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