

Should one owl be killed to save another?

By Francesca Lyman, Sacramento Bee

It's a warm sunny day in early August and wildlife biologist Eric Forsman heads up to the Willamette National Forest in Oregon's Cascades mountains to climb trees. In this land of 200-foot Douglas firs, Forsman will hoist himself up in a harness to check the nests of red tree-voles, a staple of the northern spotted owl's diet.

From the large tree cavities where spotted owls nest to the decaying logs where they hunt for prey, these birds depend on the lush, old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest. They are among dozens of species in these ancient forests threatened with extinction, mostly as a result of habitat loss.

But Forsman and his crew of wildlife researchers are reckoning with another threat to the spotted owl: A rival bird getting a critical claw-hold in nesting areas. The barred owl, a larger, brasher, faster-breeding transplant from the East Coast, has invaded the spotted owl's territory, which ranges from Northern California to Washington.

"If you asked me 30 or 40 years ago, I'd tell you that if we just did a good job of protecting old-growth forests, spotted owls would do just fine," Forsman says.

Neglected for years, the northern spotted owl was listed as a threatened species in 1990, after decades of clear-cut logging reduced 90 percent of its old-growth habitat. A landmark 1991 federal ruling forced cutbacks of timber harvests, and the charismatic spotted owl became an icon in a bitter fight between the logging industry and environmentalists.

Lumber mills closed, and thousands of loggers lost jobs in the timber wars, as the Northwest Forest Plan cut harvests on federal lands by 80 percent.

Just as the northern spotted owl seemed spared, it has faced competition from the barred owl, its closely-related cousin. As spotted owl populations have plummeted – by up to 50 percent in Washington in the last 15 years – the number of barred owls has boomed. In some places, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, barred owls may have doubled and tripled within 30 years or less.

“The barred owl is throwing a huge monkey wrench into everything – our research and our management of the forests,” Forsman says.

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