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Barred Owl to The Rescue!

As we heard from the Times-Standard a couple of weeks ago, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) wants to shoot a lot of barred owls - more than 400,000 in fact! … in the belief that this is the only way to rescue the northern spotted owl (NSO) from extinction. It has engaged in the formal approval process, and is inviting public comment.

As a downstream resident who has been fearful of Humboldt Redwood Company, active since 2014 in the Mattole headwaters, I am delighted to be able to praise them for their decision not to participate in shooting barred owls. HRC’s Habitat Conservation Report for 2022 documents the stability of their NSO banded population. This measured and dispassionate document resonates with a statement of Eric Forsman, former US Fish & Wildlife spotted owl biologist, that “it was never really just about Spotted Owls, it was always more about protecting the incredible structural and species diversity that was present in these old forests.”

Forests provide air and water purification, erosion control, carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, wildlife habitat and climate regulation. They provide 40% of the earth’s rainfall. As John Perlin wrote, in “A Forest Journey”, “the scientific world now sees the entire tree - leaves, trunk, roots, and overstory - as a mighty geochemical agent that has drastically changed the landscape and the atmosphere for the betterment of all living things”. Without trees, Earth would be another Venus.

We all know the NSO well. Thirty years ago we watched plays and musicals about it. Bumper stickers flashed by with the message, “Save a logger eat an owl!” after Judge Dwyer prohibited, in 1991, logging on some of the older forests which remained after the 100-year-long timber boom. Only 3% of the old growth had been left standing. Giant stumps haunt our forests, and their descendants, surrounding them, are doomed to be cut, mainly at 40 years of age.

Agencies and timber companies are still arguing over how much land should be set aside for the owl. Continued logging has shrunk estimates. Although NSOs evolved with forest fires, and happily forage in burned sites, salvage logging removes that possibility.

Moreover, another factor has entered the discussion. The barred owl, a native easterner who pioneered cross-country, has settled in Pacific Northwest forests. A survivor, it can live in suburbia, eat Norwegian rats, and glean from garbage dumps.

But it likes deep woods, and has moved enthusiastically into the NSO’s neighborhood. It shares the NSO’s tastes for voles and squirrels and nests in old tree cavities. Like many immigrant populations, it reproduces rapidly. And it mates with NSO offspring.

The spotted owls are traumatized. Many have become “floaters”: fewer are interested in nesting and breeding. They don’t answer the anxious calls of experts.

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The Endangered Species Act requires the USFWS to “pursue management policies necessary to facilitate the recovery “of any species it has listed. No one is disposed to giving the NSO back its habitat of 100 years ago: quite the opposite. USFWS hit upon a solution, cheap and popular: targeting the barred owl. They experimented by shooting 3600 barred owls in discrete locations, and NSO numbers rose.

With that experiment as armor, USFWS is now going for 400,000+.

EPIC’s Tom Wheeler ridicules the barred owl’s defenders: they just do it because the owl is “cute”. Well, so it is, but beauty is a strong argument. And owls have an important role in all traditional structures of civilization. They’re surrounded with mystery, attributed with wisdom, revered as sacred messengers.

But there’s science too. Shooting will not work. The NSO is too far gone. To resurrect it, there would have to be a change in values, in human consciousness. There would have to be a change in owl consciousness, too. The NSO would, like a shy person, have to become more assertive, and the barred owl (who won’t go away) less pushy.

The best way for Northern Spotted Owls to survive is to interbreed. And that’s what they are doing! … but USFWS wants to shoot the hybrids too, to prevent “genetic swamping.” In its abstract laboratory mind, it’s insisting on genetic purity, forgetting that species identities have been fluid ever since life began. Specification is a human concept.

The northern spotted owl will not, as Eric Forsman had hoped, save the forest. Shooting the barred owl will not save the northern spotted owl.

 The barred owl has come to the rescue! Management, put down your guns.