

Subject: Great Gray owls in Tetons logging impacts them.
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Date: Wednesday, July 31, 2013 10:19 PM

Jackson Hole News & Guide

Biologists track owls to save homes from logging
Great grays fitted with GPS backpacks to learn about habits, numbers.

*By Mike Koshmrl, Jackson Hole, Wyo.
July 31, 2013*

Perched partway up a twisted pine, a great gray owl stared at a white mouse that had nowhere to run.

The mouse, tethered to the ground by an alligator clip, was planted by Craighead Beringia South biologists hoping to catch the female *Strix nebulosa*, which sat nearby panting. It was an easy meal, and the great gray had a clear line of sight on the critter, but she seemed not to give a hoot.

"Right when we arrived, she fed the fledgling a vole," said Beth Mendelsohn, who'd been tracking the owl since sunup. "This bird seems a little more spooky than most."

Mendelsohn, along with Katherine Gura and Bryan Bedrosian, had hoped to net and then fix a GPS-equipped backpack to the great gray. The team had managed to fix backpacks to five great grays this summer.



Craighead Beringia South biologist Bryan Bedrosian lets a captured gray owl spread its wings to allow a newly-attached tracking device to work into its feathers near Red Top Meadows. Bedrosian has been putting transmitters and ID bands on several owls in order to study the birds' home range.
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These are some of the first electronically tracked owls in the world, Bedrosian said. GPS trackers are usually solar-powered, and that's an issue because owls are most active at night.

The owl-catching crew came up empty-handed. The female, which was caring for a lone offspring, saw through the biologists' ploy.

"Some birds are like, 'yeah, nice try,'" Bedrosian, Beringia South's avian program director, said after giving up.

Beringia South, based in Kelly, is in the middle of the first great gray owl research project in Jackson

Hole in two decades. Biologists Susan Patla, with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, and Kerry Murphy, with the Bridger-Teton National Forest, are collaborators. Funds have come from a state of Wyoming wildlife grant, the Community Foundation of Jackson Hole, Four Seasons Hotel and Resorts and Ecotour Adventures.

Locally, little is known about the species. Numbers, home ranges — it's all unknown territory, Bedrosian said.

What is known is that there aren't many great grays.

"We found very few owls," Bedrosian said, recalling a winter of combing the mountains from Grand Teton National Park to the Snake River. "There just isn't that many nests."

Meanwhile, the Teton to Snake Fuels Management Project, a wildfire reduction plan that will thin critical old-growth habitat, looms. Cuts, thinning and limbing is proposed in some of the birds' prime range in the Bridger-Teton National Forest.

The plan is designed to protect private property and to allow natural fires to burn in the nearby Palisades Wilderness Study Area.

The Forest Service has pledged to put a buffer around the home ranges of great grays and other owl species, Bedrosian said. As a result his team of biologists has been going "gangbusters" trying to find nest sites.

At 6 a.m. four days later, the biologists were back wandering the woods near Red Top Meadows.

Bedrosian hooted.

"My call must not be that bad — it screwing up both the girls," he said.

On the second take, the biologists opted to switch capture techniques.

A gerbil enclosed in a mesh cage lined with looped monofilament fishing line took the place of the tethered mouse. It's name was Peppermint.

Just shy of two hours into the search the group once again found the mother great gray.

Shortly thereafter, they caught her.

"Got it," Bedrosian shouted.

"Thankfully I didn't have to tackle her this time," he said. "Last time I had to do a flying leap as it got off the trap."

It was routine work for the Beringia South team, but they all seemed energized.



"Peppermint worked," Gura said.

The great gray, whose beady yellow eyes were covered with a ball cap, was a healthy two-pound female.

The bird looked much larger, but that's because she was all fluff.

"There's just so many feathers," Bedrosian said. "They appear larger in size than a great horned owl, but a great horned owl is quite a bit bigger actually."

The plumage is for a reason.

Great grays are a boreal forest species and don't venture much farther south than Jackson Hole in the Northern Rockies. Warming climates figure to shift their ranges north and uphill, Bedrosian said.

"They are an extremely heat-intolerant species," he said.

After measurements and blood samples were taken, the captive owl was fixed with two ID bands. Somewhere in the process a razor-sharp talon punctured the webbing between two of Bedrosian's fingers, and blood trickled.

The team then began to fit the great gray with the GPS backpack.

The transmitter weighs just 30 grams, equivalent to less than 3 percent of her weight.

"We're right at the edge of what technology can do for owls," Bedrosian said.

After she was released, the great gray, now No. A8, settled onto a perch 30 feet up and 100 or so feet away.

She started picking at the foreign straps that secured the transmitter, pausing mostly to peer down at the biologists.

Little does she know that the data the team will glean from her annoying new outfit will help save her soon-to-be mapped home range.

The area around her nest site, Bedrosian said, had been slated for treatment under the Bridger-Teton's wildfire plan.