

Forsman

BARRED OWLS, SPOTTED OWLS AND THE NORTHWEST FOREST PLAN - NOBODY SAID IT WAS GOING TO BE EASY

Eric D. Forsman¹

Historically, barred owls occurred only in the eastern U.S. and eastern Canada. In the late 1800's or early 1900's they began to move west, reaching the Glacier area in Montana by the early 1920's. No one knows for sure why or how this range expansion took place, but once across the Rocky Mountains, barred owls continued westward into western Canada and the western U.S. In 1990, when the Interagency Scientific Committee (ISC) was developing the first comprehensive management plan for the Northern Spotted Owl, Barred Owls were known to occur in Washington, Oregon, and northern California, and there was concern over their potential negative impacts on Spotted Owls. However, after considerable internal discussion, the ISC decided that there was little that management agencies could do except to manage habitat for spotted owls and hope that spotted owls could hold their own against barred owls. The large group of scientists, managers and planners on the Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team (1993) were also well aware of the potential threat posed by the barred owl, but, like the ISC Team before them, had little choice but to focus on habitat management for Spotted Owls and other species that occurred in old forests.

Since the adoption of the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) in 1994, the barred owl range expansion has continued, and Barred Owls have greatly increased in numbers throughout much of the range of the Northern Spotted Owl. An increasing body of knowledge suggests that this range expansion is resulting in the displacement of Spotted Owls from some locations, especially at lower elevations. In addition, the two species occasionally hybridize. This situation has greatly complicated what at one time was thought to be a simple relationship between Spotted Owls and habitat, and has led to concern that Spotted Owls may continue to decline in numbers no matter what plan is adopted. There is no clear prognosis regarding the outcome of this situation, but there has been much discussion about whether there is anything that managers can do to influence the situation or whether they should take a hands off approach. Regardless of the outcome, we should not forget that the NWFP was never just a plan for Spotted Owls. The overarching goal of the plan was to produce a mix of forest types that would ensure the persistence of all native animals and plants.

Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team. 1993. Forest ecosystem management: an ecological, economic, and social assessment. U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Bureau of Land anagement, Portland, OR

STATUS & TREND REPORTS CONCURRENT SESSIONS- Northern Spotted Owl

¹ U. S. Forest Service, Forestry Sciences Lab - 3200 SW Jefferson Way, Corvallis, OR