

# Commentary

## U.S. Forest Service should save spotted owls

Within the next few weeks, the U.S. Forest Service will begin to determine the fate of one of the most beautiful and rare birds in the Pacific Northwest, the northern spotted owl. Twelve management proposals, ranging from nothing to total protection, are under consideration, and the Forest Service is presently soliciting public comment on its alternatives. This may be the last

chance for individuals to make their voices heard in this decision-making process, which will shape the direction of land use in the forests of the Northwest for many years.

By Steve Albert

The northern spotted owl (*strix occidentalis caurina*) is a

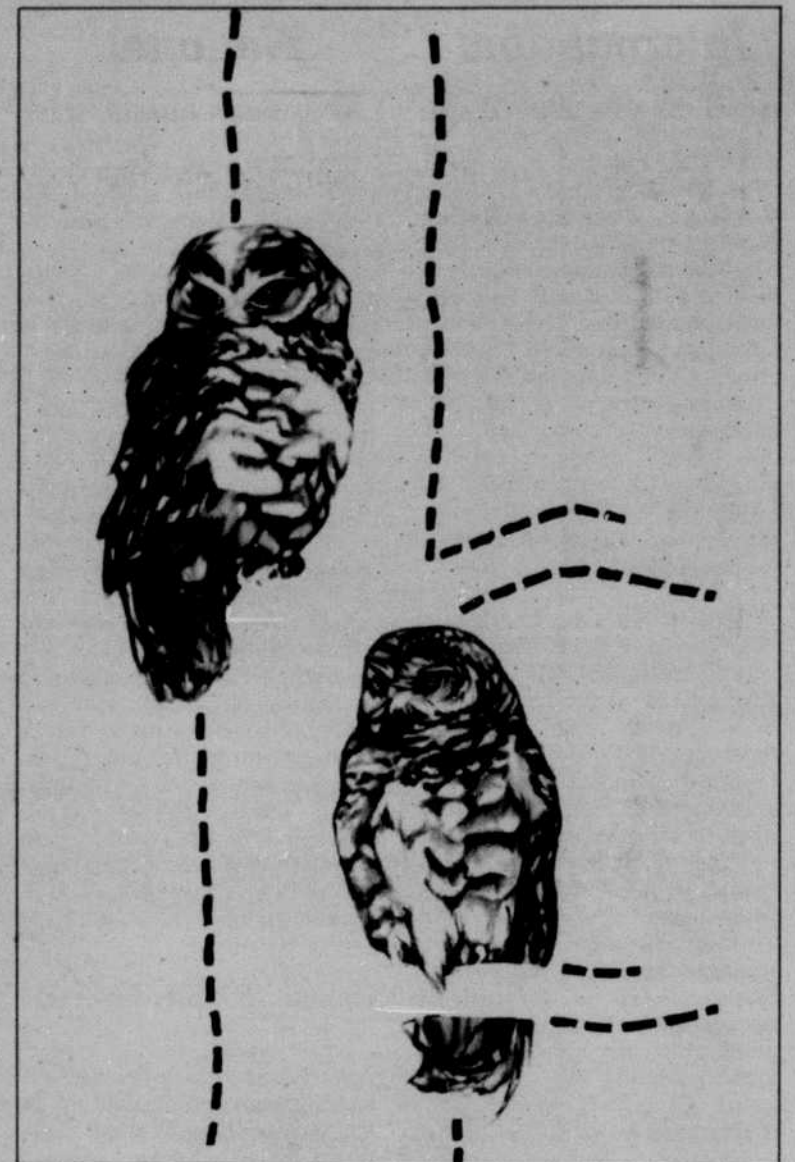
nocturnal bird of prey (raptor) that inhabits mostly mountainous old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest. It has been classified as a threatened species in Oregon and Washington, and a "species of special concern" in California by the respective state departments of fish and wildlife. The total population of owls has been estimated at about 4,000 by Eric Forsman, wildlife biologist and authority on the northern spotted owl. There are just more than 1,200 mating pairs in this state.

According to official Forest Service data, the Willamette National Forest has more spotted owls than any other region in the world.

All recent biological data conclude that the spotted owl's population has been declining and will continue to decline as the old-growth forests on which it depends are cut. Old growth dominates 98 percent of the sites where the owls are found in Oregon, according to Forsman.

The Forest Service reports that 40,000 acres of spotted owl habitat are destroyed annually. (Old growth is typically defined as trees aged 200-1,000 plus years.) Eighty percent of the old growth that was here only 25 years ago is gone, and perhaps only 2 percent remains of what was here when the first settlers arrived.

As the old growth falls, so



Graphic by Lorraine Rath

does the spotted owl population, and over 200 other wildlife species that depend on these forests for food and cover.

How ironic and auspicious that the northern spotted owl is an officially designated Forest Service "indicator species" chosen to represent the health and abundance of the old growth ecosystem as a whole.

The National Forest Management Act requires by law that the Forest Service "maintain viable populations of existing native vertebrate species" and "insure continued existence is well distributed." Yet the Forest Service is not an agency of conservationists. They are largely in the business of tree farming, and to a frightening degree, seemingly at the behest of the timber interests.


Some Forest Service proposals advocate setting aside only 300 acres per mating pair of owls (less than one-thirtieth of their potential required home range). Even the Forest Service's "preferred alternative"

would, by their own estimates, spell probable extinction for the owl within 100 years.

The time has come to stop thinking of our natural resources as discrete elements from which we can choose what we want to exploit, allowing the remainder to wither away. Conservationist and author, Aldo Leopold, wrote more than 40 years ago, "You cannot love game and hate predators. You cannot conserve the waters and waste the ranges. The land is one organism. Its parts, like our parts, compete and cooperate with each other."

This is much more of an issue than a few owls versus a few timber jobs. A weaning away from a heavy dependence on lumber would diversify the state's ailing economy as well as keep it the beautiful place we all love to live in.

These national forests are your land, not the Forest Service's. Tell them what you want.



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