

Rare spotted owl finding protection in forests of Mt. Hood

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The spotted owl has found a home in the Mt. Hood National Forest; in fact, more than 35 pairs of the rare birds have been sighted. Spotted owls mate for life. (photo courtesy of Jan Binder).

by ELIZABETH WARREN
Post Correspondent

Strix occidentalis, better known as the spotted owl, is a seldom seen indigenous bird of the Mt. Hood area. But there are 35 known pairs of spotted owls on federally-owned land and possibilities of many more unsighted pairs.

This medium-sized owl is brown with white spots on the upper body and brown horizontal barring on the lower body. Its most distinctive characteristics are dark eyes and the lack of ear tufts.

SOMP, a Spotted Owl Management Program, was founded in 1973. It is the result of an interagency endangered species task force and unites biologists, private citizens and government groups.

What happens when a pair of spotted owls are found on federal land? The regional policy of the U.S. Forest Service is to protect the owl with Spotted Owl Management Areas (SOMA). A SOMA contains the necessary tree

cover for breeding and feeding of the owl.

There are 11 SOMAs in the Mt. Hood area, according to Larry Zimmerman of the Zigzag Ranger Station. SOMAs are set up all through the forests of Oregon and Washington. SOMAs also allow for migration in addition to feeding and breeding.

"Our main objective is to keep the spotted owl off the federal threatened or endangered species lists," said wildlife expert Jan Binder of the Forest Service. "We want a minimum level of 280 pairs in Oregon."

Research has shown that the owls depend on old growth. Dense forests of 200-year-old Douglas fir and western hemlock supply the habitat where the owl roosts, nests and forages.

Spotted owls mate for life, so when the U.S. Forest Service sites one, they assume a pair is located. In winter, the owls forage in overlapping areas from the nest, where territorial defense is centered. Usually, a nest is used year after year and is

built in a broken top tree with new growth providing an umbrella cover.

Adults roost together in February or March and eggs are laid in March or April. The female incubates the eggs and the male feeds them all. Two young are usually born, leaving the nest in September when they are nearly indistinguishable from the adult.

Owls are primarily nocturnal, feeding on the northern flying squirrel, red tree vole, western red-back vole, deer mouse and the snow shoe

hare. During the winter, about 85 percent of the owl's prey is arboreal, living in trees.

The quality of the habitat, as with any species, is imperative for its survival. Where clear-cutting has occurred, there are few or no nests since the spotted owl is dependent on old growth.

But there are plenty of old growth stands in the Mt. Hood area which are protected, so the spotted owl isn't likely to wind up on any federal endangered species list just yet.

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