

# Has killing barred owls done any good?

By ERIC MORTENSON  
EO Media Group

## Northern spotted owl study areas\*

(Results for March 2015-Dec. 2016.)

Study area and treatment type	Area (acres)	Spotted owl sites	Barred owl sites
<b>1. Cle Elum</b>			
Treatment	149,250	46	113
Control	165,560	31	110
<b>2. Coast Ranges</b>			
Treatment	149,990	45	106
Control	268,105	58	176
<b>3. Klamath/Union/Myrtle</b>			
Treatment	193,480	84	144
Control	172,475	78	124

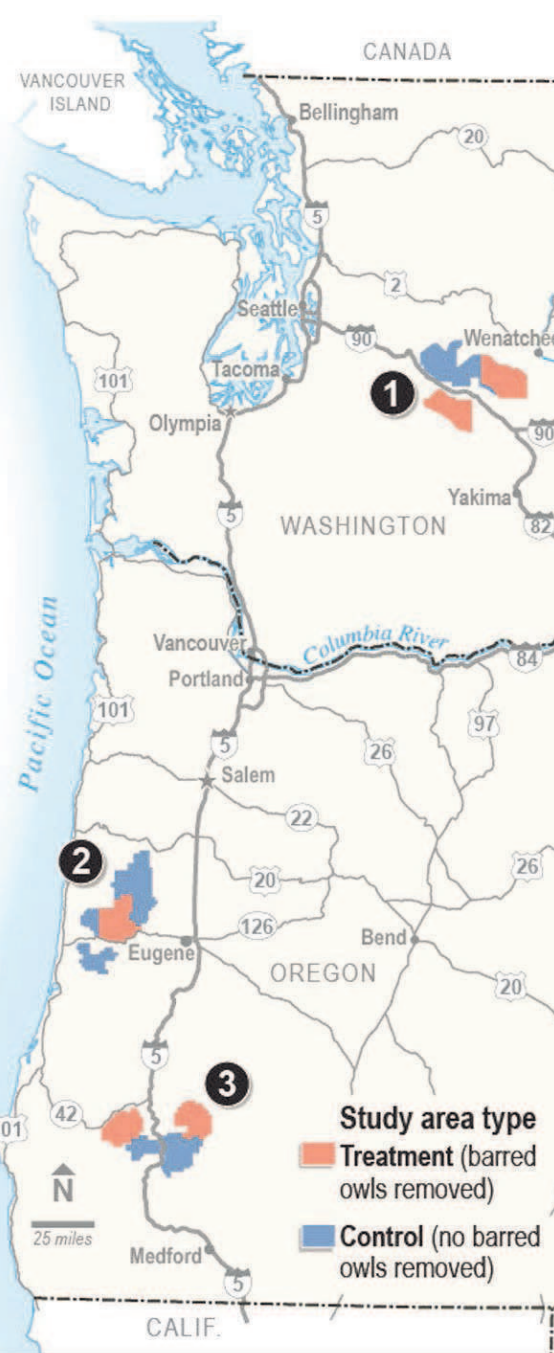
\*A fourth study area is in Northern California where barred owls are being removed from Hoopa Valley tribal land.



The spotted owl was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species act in 1990. The two main threats to this owl are habitat loss and competition from the barred owl, a non-native species.

Sources: U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Alan Kenaga/Capitol Press



Courtesy of Ray Bosch, U.S. Fish and Wildlife  
**Researcher Zachary Hanna of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology and California Academy of Sciences collects tissue samples from a barred owl killed in a project to benefit threatened northern spotted owls in the Pacific Northwest.**

“definitive evidence” that spotted owls’ decline was reversed on Green Diamond Resource land, but conditions elsewhere are much different, Wiens said. The Oregon Coast Range, for example, has a much higher density of barred owls, he said.

Even if it does work, land managers might be required to revisit areas and shoot more barred owls to keep them at bay.

Lingering in the background is whether wildlife biologists should be killing barred owls at all.

“It is gut-wrenching,” said Wiens, the USGS raptor ecologist. “It is for all of us.”

He said barred owls are an apex predator that has “completely taken over” spotted owl habitat. “This experiment is a way to get a handle on that.”

Lowell Diller, who died in March, once called it a “Sophie’s Choice” dilemma.

“Shooting a beautiful raptor that is remarkably adaptable and fit for its new environment seems unpalatable and ethically wrong,” he wrote in *Wildlife Professional* magazine in 2013. “But the choice to do nothing is also unpalatable, and I believe also ethically wrong.”

If human action such as logging caused major alterations to spotted owl habitat, and development paved the way for barred owls to move west, “Don’t we have a societal responsibility to at least give them a fighting chance to survive?” Diller asked.

Federal wildlife researchers killed 737 invasive barred owls in 2015-16 in an ongoing experiment to determine if removing them will aid the recovery of Northern spotted owls, the bird whose threatened status was at the center of the Pacific Northwest timber wars.

Spotted owl populations have continued to decline rapidly despite environmental lawsuits, protection under the Endangered Species Act and logging restrictions in the old growth timber habitat they favor. Barred owls, which are larger, more aggressive and feed on a wider variety of prey, have taken over spotted owl territory throughout their range in Oregon, Washington and Northern California.

Scientists with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Geological Survey, partnering with the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, agreed to an experiment: Kill hundreds of barred owls in the Cle Elum area of Washington, the Oregon Coast Range and Klamath-Union-Myrtle areas of Oregon and Hoopa Valley tribal land in Northern California.

In Oregon and Washington, field crews shot 642 barred owls using 12 gauge shotguns and captured one owl alive, turning it over to the Oregon High Desert Museum in Bend.

In Northern California, where early research by the late Lowell Diller of Humboldt State University documented that spotted owls reclaimed nesting areas after barred owls were removed, researchers killed 95 of the competitors.

### High stakes

Ranchers and farmers in the Pacific Northwest have a stake in Endangered Species Act and wildlife restoration projects undertaken by government agencies. They often referred to the potential rangeland restrictions that might accompany an ESA listing for greater sage grouse as “the spotted owl on steroids.” They’ve also dealt with wolves spreading into the four states and attacking livestock.

Northern spotted owls were listed as threatened under the ESA in 1990, which greatly reduced logging in the Pacific Northwest,

especially on federal land. Their continued decline could result in it getting listed as endangered, which might bring even more restrictions on human activities in the woods.

So far, nothing has worked. The Northwest Forest Plan set aside 18.5 million acres of the older forests that spotted owls prefer, “But then the barred owl emerged as a threat capable of sweeping through the entire range of the northern spotted owl,” researcher Diller wrote in a 2013 magazine article.

Barred owls are from the East

Coast and appear to have moved west over the decades, following development. They are 15 to 20 percent larger than spotted owls, which Diller called “the human equivalent of a heavyweight going up against a middleweight.”

Working on forest land owned by Green Diamond Resource Co., and with federal permission, Diller and fellow researchers killed dozens of barred owls over five years and documented the return of spotted owls. The work had startling results. Spotted owls “rapidly re-occupied” areas where

barred owls were removed, Diller wrote. In one case, a female spotted owl returned to a nesting site seven years after she’d been last seen.

Overall, Diller’s work showed “removal of barred owls in combination with habitat conservation could slow or even reverse population declines at a local scale.”

Researchers don’t know if that success will be repeated.

### ‘Sophie’s Choice’

“It’s way too early to say,” said David Wiens, a raptor ecologist with USGS. Diller’s work was

## Nonprofit horse ranch turns focus toward humans

By KURT LIEDTKE  
Herald and News

Since 1998, the Butterfly Ranch in Silver Lake has tried to save abused, abandoned and neglected animals with the hope of eventually finding them new homes.

Now, the 501c3 nonprofit hopes to turn its attention to rehabilitating humans in need through equine therapy.

A family operation, the 40-acre ranch tucked away northwest of the small rural community in Lake County is a small property with a big heart. It is overseen by Matt and Rachel Wilson with assistance by their daughters.

The Butterfly Ranch has been a new home for many abandoned or neglected animals, specializing in horses for treatment and on-site long-term care, with the hope of providing a second chance at a loving home.

Despite the ever-present demand for this service, the ranch operated at a loss, the majority of its roughly \$42,000 estimated annual operating costs coming directly out of the family’s private resources.

Throughout its operations, the Wilsons, who are also accomplished musicians and artists, have tried to expand its activities to garner a more rounded interest such as hosting clinics, youth camps and summer arts and music camps. The couple also comprise a popular acoustic folk duo, Wampus Cat, and tour extensively across the West Coast while also hosting an annual Lake County music festival fundraiser — The Wildhorse Opry.

Their music act is a symbiotic relationship with the Butterfly Ranch’s purpose, each concert an opportunity to educate and fundraise for the ranch’s life-saving operations.

The duo recently released a new music video for their single, “Bathsheba,” filmed on location at the Butterfly Ranch, for an upcoming CD release this summer.

### Rehabilitation

Now the Butterfly Ranch plans to take a new direction, modifying its focus as rehabilitation for people through animal-related activities.

Returning to its original mission statement, the ranch hopes to focus its efforts on working with families



Kurt Liedtke /The Herald And News

In this April 2017 photo, Rachel Wilson, of the Butterfly Ranch in Silver Lake makes the morning rounds feeding an assortment of rescued animals being rehabilitated for eventual re-adoption.

and individuals who have suffered trauma or are at-risk, pairing them with skill-building opportunities by working directly with horses.

Although neither are certified counselors, Rachel Wilson is working toward a masters in psychology.

Equine therapy has been used effectively in drug rehabilitation programs as a way to focus and recover from mental and physical trauma, a path the Wilsons hope to follow as well.

“We want to work with individuals who may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, have failing marriages or come from broken families and help them reconnect through working with horses,” said Rachel Wilson.

“It would also be a skill-building setting, where people with community service requirements or at-risk teens and others who want to get back to nature, can work with wild horses outside of the typical aspects found at a general youth roping school or youth camp. It has great rehab potential, reconnecting and rejuvenating relationships where people depend on equine for therapy.”

To achieve this goal, Wilson is preparing grant submissions totaling \$2.7 million to construct indoor and outdoor riding facilities complete with barn and lodge to house a fully-operational equine therapy facility.

Wilson hopes that with grant support and sponsorships, the facility could be operational as

early as next year. The lodge would also be available for weddings, business conferences, artisan getaways, clinics and other events.

### Outdoor therapy

The ranch hosts an annual summer teepee camp, dubbed Cow Camp Silver Lake, allowing camping grounds in Native American style teepees with therapy trail rides and basic amenities provided. The Wilsons plan to install a solar-powered shower and outdoor arena this year to add to the camping experience.

“We have tried to involve the community in so many different ways,” said Wilson. “To be able to share horses, we offered up so many different things that our personal skills could provide. Now we’re staying focused on what we love and what we feel we should be doing by providing therapy to people through horses.”

Equine therapy has proven effective at various rehabilitation facilities across the country as an alternative to traditional medical detoxification practices. It is purely a mental and motor-skill practice requiring close concentration while establishing a relationship with an animal that cannot otherwise communicate. Rather than verbal skills the connection required with the animal is based on different skills not normally utilized in human relationships.

“There’s something very calming about having a conversation with a silent partner, someone that does not verbalize,” explained

Wilson.

“Working with a horse requires disconnecting from verbal communication, it forces people to be silent and observe. It takes people out of the anxieties of the world and various PTSD triggers, removing the comfort zone and placing a person in new surroundings. It’s not based on emotions, but drawing beyond normal behavior.”

Wilson noted that the extensive mental focus and symbiotic partnership required to complete specific tasks with a therapeutic equine partner brings on a quietness to a near-meditative state, withdrawing a person from the stress of the normal world and focusing only on the animal. This results in a greater sense of success when tasks are achieved, having a tangible positive impact on human emotions and behavior.

### Silent communication

“Inevitably the animal connects with the person, and they gain a silent confidant that they can grow very attached to, building a trust that may otherwise be broken which has led to that individual’s PTSD, pain and inability to communicate,” said Wilson.

“That person can now find new ways to trust by connecting with an animal, and a horse will do that every time. They want to have the motivation to accomplish another task, whereas before depression or anger may be so deep that there is a blockage in performing any task.”

Wilson reiterated that they are very careful to match a person with the right horse to create what she calls a very real and spiritual connection between human and animal.

“There is a great power in horses, people gain self-esteem and their emotional core begins to reconstruct with that cornerstone of trust,” added Wilson.

“People who have been abused start seeing their ability to assert themselves in a positive healthy way when they have to be a leader. It makes for positive giving and desire to achieve a goal. We can really see in abused neglected and broken souls, especially women and children; give them a horse and they start to soften and self-esteem grows and suddenly they’re able to communicate without aggression or fear.”

## Hells Canyon chinook season opens April 22

East Oregonian

Spring chinook season will open in Hells Canyon on April 22 from the Dug Bar boat ramp to the boundary below Hells Canyon Dam.

Snake River spring chinook are currently making their way up the Columbia River headed for Hells Canyon.

“While we don’t expect these fish to arrive for a few weeks, we want anglers to have access as soon as they do,” said Jeff Yanke, ODFW fish biologist in Enterprise. “This has been a popular opportunity in recent years and is a good chance to catch some springers close to home.”

The daily bag limit is four spring chinook per day with no more than two being adults over 24 inches. Anglers must stop fishing for salmon for the day when they have retained four salmon or two adult salmon, whichever comes first. Barbless hooks and a Columbia River Basin Endorsement are required when fishing for salmon, steelhead and sturgeon in the Snake River. All other 2017 sport fishing regulations apply. Due to limited access in this section, most anglers access this fishery below Hells Canyon Dam or by jet boat.

Managers with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and Idaho Fish and Game expect a modest run of about 2,000 hatchery spring Chinook to return to Hells Canyon Dam.

“Unfortunately, chinook runs have been lagging in recent years due to unfavorable ocean conditions,” said Yanke.

Snake River spring chinook enter the Columbia river during early spring and travel nearly 600 miles past eight dams to reach Hells Canyon Dam These fish are raised at Rapid River Hatchery in Idaho with funds provided by the Idaho Power Company.

**Have an adventure story? Tell us! Email ttrainor@eastoregonian.com**