

Feds propose shooting one owl to save another in Pacific Northwest

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Barred Owl at Malheur NWR. Credit: [Ray Bosch/USFWS](#), CC-2.0. Used with permission.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to enlist shooters to kill more than 500,000 barred owls over the next 30 years in the Pacific

Northwest to preserve habitat for northern spotted owls, a protected species.

Barred [owls](#) are native to the East Coast but since the 1950s have been expanding their range in the Northwest. They are relentless predators who eat anything that moves. They will yank worms from the ground and salamanders out from under rocks. Nail birds on the wing and anything in the water, from fish to snails to crayfish and frogs. Even slugs are on the menu.

They are also bigger, more aggressive and more territorial than the [northern spotted owl](#), posing a threat to their survival as a species, which is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Now the [federal government](#) is detailing a [rescue plan](#).

The goal of a draft environmental impact statement for the agency's barred owl reduction program is to take out the owls in the northern [spotted owl](#)'s range in Washington and Oregon and to focus on heading off expansion of the barred owl into the range of the California spotted owl.

Assuming complete implementation of the proposal, an initial cull of about 20,000 barred owls would occur in the first year. Then, an annual reduction of 13,397 birds a year in the first decade of the program; 16,303 a year in the second decade and 17,390 birds each year in the third decade, in parts of Washington, Oregon and California—11 to 14 million acres in all.

The weapon of choice would be a large-bore shotgun and night scopes as needed for work in darkness or low light. When gunfire is too dangerous near people, capture and euthanasia would be substituted.

Any landowner or land manager may ask the agency to let them remove the owls under the agency's protocol, training specifications and permit.

The removal season is recommended during late spring through midsummer and fall. Shooters are directed to lure the owls with a recording of another owl's call. When a barred owl comes within 30 yards and is stationary, they would shoot to kill.

There is not much time left for the northern spotted owl, the agency concluded. Populations in study areas throughout the owl's range have declined from 35% to more than 80% over the past two decades. California spotted owls, which the service proposed for endangered species listing earlier this year, face a similar risk from barred owl competition as it expands southward.

"Everywhere the spotted owl can live and thrive, barred owls can thrive and do even better," said Katherine Fitzgerald, northern spotted owl recovery lead for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, based in Portland. "They are still invading, and they are not done."

A declining species

Much has been done to try to rescue the northern spotted owl, the poster animal of the campaign to save the old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest. The owl was listed as a threatened species in 1990. Then, in 1994, a [federal judge](#) approved the Northwest Forest Plan, devised under the Clinton administration, to set aside some 24 million acres of old-growth forests on federal land. The multispecies protection plan was intended to preserve habitat for the spotted owl on federal lands in the places scientists deemed most important for its survival, from Washington to California.

The owl depends on old-growth forests where its primary prey—small

mammals that thrive in the complex, unique environment of old growth forests—include flying squirrels and tree voles.

But the owl, already greatly reduced in numbers by logging before the Northwest Forest Plan, faces continued habitat loss from wildfire and logging on unprotected lands. And now, it is mortally threatened by a devastating, invading competitor.

Barred owls were first documented in British Columbia in 1959 and in Washington, Oregon and California in the 1970s. Today, there are well over 100,000 barred owls in the northern spotted owl's territory in Washington, Oregon and Northern California, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Theories as to why the barred owl is now here vary. But the general picture includes the alteration of the original landscape and killing and removal of its Native people and wildlife by settler colonizers.

Exactly because the barred owl is now so pervasive, some experts think the kill program is madness.

"Once you start, you can never stop," said Eric Forsman, a leading spotted owl expert whose research while he worked at the U.S. Forest Service informed the Northwest Forest Plan. Forsman helped map the forests set aside in the plan and knows personally individual northern spotted owl nest sites in trees that have since burned in wildfires. He knows prime habitat is now bereft of spotted owls because of all the human-caused threats to the owl's existence.

He sees nothing but doom ahead for the species he devoted his career to, whether or not the barred owl is gunned down to save it.

"What I think is going to happen is in most of these areas, spotted owls

are going to eventually, in fact fairly soon, go extinct. There simply will be none left," Forsman said.

"It makes me incredibly sad."

An owl so calm

For Robin Bown, a biologist and barred owl management strategy lead for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Portland, spotted owls were the birds that spoiled her for working with any other animal. They were just so calm, so unafraid of humans, she once banded a spotted owl as it slept in her lap. The joke among biologists is that spotted owls have Valium for blood.

Bown acknowledges the enormous scope and long haul the agency is proposing, beginning as soon as spring of 2025. People can always terminate the program, but "if you don't do the program, you won't have spotted owls," Bown said.

Every five years, the service does an analysis to determine how northern populations of the spotted owl are doing. Free fall is the only description that fits: The last report in 2021 showed significant population change in every single one of the study areas, showing that more than 75% of the population that was there in the 1990s was gone.

Because the owl is a federally listed species, the agency is obligated to do everything it can legally and ethically to recover spotted owl populations, said Kessina Lee, state supervisor for the Oregon office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The goal is not to kill every barred owl in the West but to strategically take pressure off spotted owls where possible. At the most, about 30% of the barred owl population in the range of the northern spotted owl

would be killed. "We know we can't fully eradicate them, but we know we can create [refuge] areas with much lower barred owl density that allows spotted owls to survive and thrive," Lee said.

In four study areas in Oregon, Washington and northern California, killing [barred owls](#) under an agency research study brought spotted owls to almost stable populations, whereas in a neighboring control population, spotted owl populations declined by 12%.

The agency's experts are confident scaling the pilot up now to knock back the barred owl invasion can give the northern spotted owl a chance at recovery.

"We know we can make a difference. Can it be done? The answer is yes," Lee said.

Not that selling the public on this will be easy.

"Are we going to do more harm than good? Do we really want a bunch of people in the woods shooting at what are otherwise protected birds?" said Bob Sallinger, executive director of Bird Conservation Oregon, a nonprofit he started after retiring from 30 years of bird advocacy at Portland Audubon.

There, he fought hard against the program run by the Corps of Engineers to kill cormorants eating protected salmon in the Columbia River. "I nearly always opposed these sorts of programs," Sallinger said. But on this one, he is still making up his mind.

"I do put the highest priority on preventing extinction, and there is science that shows us this is probably necessary," Sallinger said. "But this is really a no-win, awful situation we created for ourselves. It is appalling we have to consider these kinds of measures, and incredibly sad."

Changes in the land

None of this, of course, is the barred owl's fault. They are just taking advantage of the habitat created for them. The settlers killed off beaver and bison that chewed off sprouting young trees. Settlers also suppressed fires and killed and pushed out the Native people whose fire management regimes also maintained open lands.

In addition to creating conditions that allowed trees to naturally take root and grow, settlers planted millions upon millions of trees to provide shelterbelts around their homes and farms and prevent erosion. All of these activities put out a welcome mat for the barred owl, to colonize what had been treeless terrain. Warming temperatures with climate change helped.

Now, as the barred owl continues feasting on native animals in its new home, biologists fear not only extinction for the spotted owl in the near future. They also worry about other native, naive animals being mowed down and gobbled up by a novel predator—or facing new competition for their own prey.

The barred owl's omnivorous and ferocious appetite could have cascading effects on the ecosystem and its food webs.

The draft environmental impact statement can be read here at the agency's website. A 60-day public comment period began Nov. 17 and closes Jan. 16. Information on how to submit comments is available at www.regulations.gov by searching under docket number FWS-R1-ES-2022-0074.

The Service will host an informational virtual public meeting on Dec. 14 from 6-8 p.m. Pacific Time. This meeting will focus on management within the range of California spotted owls.

A link and access instructions to the virtual meetings will be posted at www.fws.gov/office/oregon-fish-and-wildlife at least one week before the public meeting date.

Correction Note (12/12/2023): The barn owl image has been replaced with a barred owl image.

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