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The spotted owl's new nemesis

Adaptable, feisty barred owl pushing out meeker cousin

BY CHARLES BERGMAN

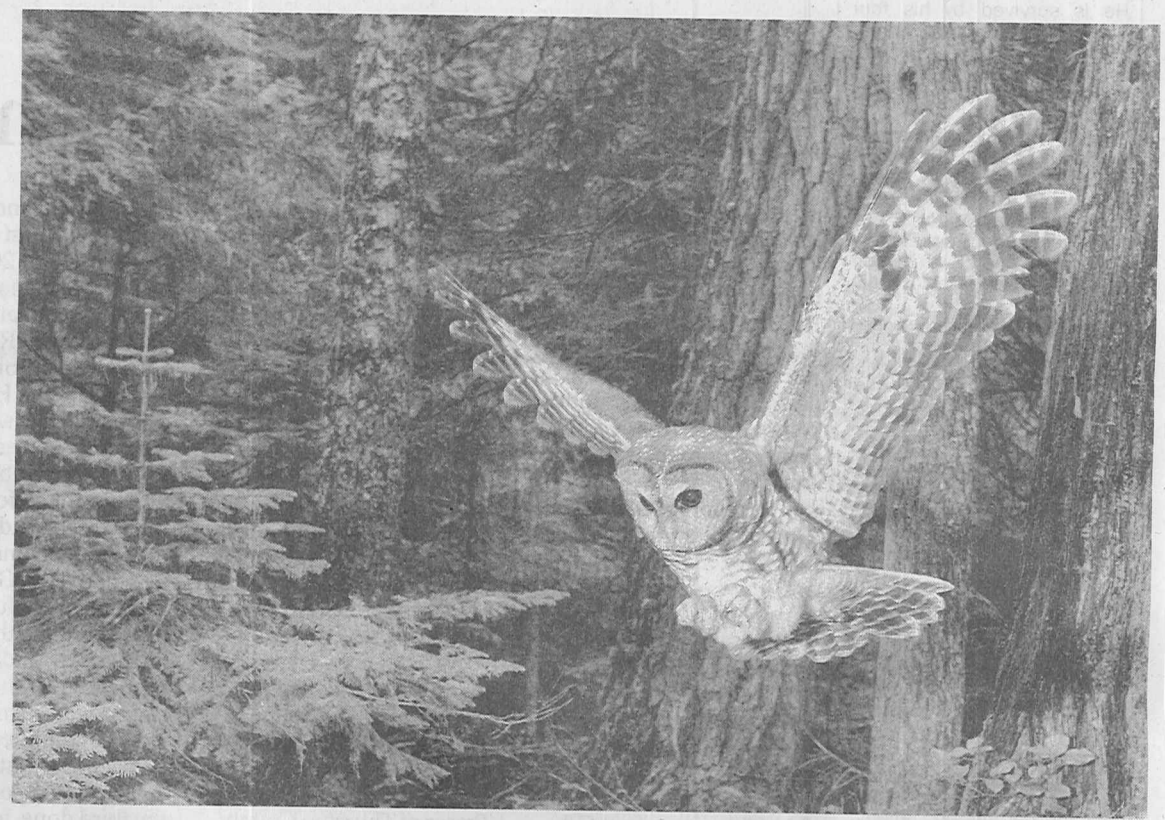

Photo courtesy of Charles Bergman

The threatened spotted owl , above, is facing competition for habitat from the larger barred owl.

Big-eyed and sweet-faced, the spotted owl may be the most famous, and the unluckiest, bird in the country.

Only 20 years ago, it was a national symbol for one of the defining environmental battles of the last century–the fight over the old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest. Now it faces a new and more desperate battle, one that has it staring straight into the face of extinction.

The new threat comes not from people, but an invasion of its own cousin, the aggressive and highly adaptable barred owl.

The future for spotted owls currently looks so bleak that wildlife managers have plans to kill thousands of barred owls.

"It's a rarer and rarer sight," Dale Herter told me, referring to a spotted owl not 10 feet away from us on a steep slope near Mount Rainier. A biologist who's studied spotted owls in the Cascades for 22 years, he's documented their accelerating decline. The owl looked at us with her huge, darkly luminous eyes. Spotted owls are famous for their approachability and friendly charm.

"They could be gone in a decade or two, and there's not much we can do," Herter said. Then in a tone that underscored the looming controversy, he added, "Unless we kill all the barred owls."

In 1990, the Pacific Northwest's spotted owl was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, igniting a controversy over old-growth forests that reached all the way to the White House. President Bill Clinton called for a forest summit that led to the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan, reducing timber harvests and protecting owls. It also helped to preserve the last remnants of our region's spectacular old-growth forests, which had been reduced by about 80 percent of their former extent.

Loggers complained bitterly about the spotted owl, but the truth is, harvesting at previous levels was no longer sustainable.

Still, the spotted owl continued to decline, falling about 3.5 percent per year. In Washington, where ranges are much bigger, they're declining faster, at 7.5 percent. The rate has been slower on federally protected forests, but the overall trend is ominous, unmistakable, maybe inescapable.

On the Olympic Peninsula, for example, there were 150 spotted owls in 1992. In 2009, just 13.

In Dale Herter's study area in the Cascades, there were 127 owls in the 1990s. Now, he quips, there may not be that many in the whole state.

The new threat comes from the barred owl, which has not only moved into the area, but has become a neighborhood bully. Once found only in the East, they made their way across the prairies, arriving first in British Columbia, then dropping south.

The first barred owl was reported in Washington in 1965, in Oregon in 1974 and in California in 1981.

One theory is that they first took over logged areas and spread into other habitats, but no one is

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OWL

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sure why they came. Though members of the same genus of owl – Strix – the two species are quite different, like spots and stripes. The spotted owl is friendly, slow to reproduce and famously limited to a narrow ecological niche of old-growth forests.

The barred owl is feisty and a supremely adaptable generalist. It's also a breeding machine. They've been seen chasing spotted owls out of their territories, even attacking them. Then they take over.

Eric Forsman is the pre-eminent spotted owl biologist. In the 1970s, on his study site in Oregon – the study that made the species famous – there were no barred owls. On that same site now, there are 82 pairs of barred owls and only 15 pairs of spotted owls.

"Lots and lots and lots of 'em," Forsman said, referring to barred owls throughout the Pacific Northwest.

In what may ultimately be a quixotic effort, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has designed an experiment to "remove" barred owls from selected areas, to see if spotted owls will return. A decision is due soon, perhaps in January, and will likely involve shooting thousands – the top option is 8,953 – of barred owls.

As Dan Ashe, the director of USFWS, puts it, "We have a clear obligation to do all we can to prevent the spotted owl's extinction."

It's easy to understand the desire to save this beloved and beleaguered owl. Yet Forsman has reservations. Despite devoting his professional life to spotted owls, he said, "To work, we'll have to kill thousands of barred owls forever." He added, "Well, it's an ethical struggle."

I recently visited a family of barred owls on Bainbridge Island. Barred owls first arrived on the island in 1992. Now they're everywhere. I found a mom and her two babies in a maple tree, huddled on a mossy branch. This particular mom produces two to three babies per year. It's hard not to admire such powerful and successful birds.

Then I remembered the female spotted owl I'd seen on Mount Rainier. She may produce one baby every other year. What's her future?

We're left with a terrible choice, one that pits two handsome, charismatic and incompatible species of owl against each other. It speaks to the complexities, and maybe also the limits, of what our management of nature is able to do.

Charles Bergman teaches writing and literature at Pacific Lutheran University. His writing and photographs appear frequently in national magazines on environmental and animal issues.