



Frequently Asked Questions about the California Spotted Owl

California Spotted Owl, (*Strix occidentalis occidentalis*), is one of three recognized subspecies of spotted owls, including the northern spotted owl and the Mexican spotted owl. Spotted owls are medium-sized brown owls with white spots on the head, neck and back and underparts, and white and light brown bars on the wings and tail. They have brown eyes and round heads without ear tufts. The feathers of the California spotted owl are a lighter shade of brown than those of the northern spotted owl, but darker than those of the Mexican spotted owl. Its spots are smaller than those of the Mexican subspecies, larger than the northern subspecies' spots. California spotted owls eat small mammals, birds and insects. Spotted owls have been known to live as long as 17 years.

California spotted owls occur mostly on the westside of the Sierra Nevada from Shasta County south to the Tehachapi Pass and a few sites on the east side. They also occur in the central Coast Ranges as far north as Monterey County and in all major mountains of southern California including the San Bernardino, San Gabriel, Tehachapi, north and south Santa Lucia, Santa Ana, Liebre/Sawmill, San Diego, San Jacinto and Los Padres ranges.

California spotted owls nest at elevations from 1,000 to 7,700 feet, with the majority of all nests found between 3,000 and 7,000 feet. They use large trees that have cavities, broken tops or platforms such as mistletoe clumps,

debris platforms and old raptor or squirrel nests. Nest trees are often more than 200 years old. Spotted owls do not nest every year and they are not always successful when they do nest. When they are successful, they usually raise one or two young.

California spotted owls eat a variety of mammals, birds and insects, but usually select a few key species. In the upper elevations of the Sierra Nevada, the primary prey is the northern flying squirrel. In lower elevations of the Sierra Nevada and in Southern California, the primary prey is the dusky-footed woodrat. Both flying squirrels and woodrats occur in the diets of owls in the central Sierra Nevada.

Predators of the California spotted owl include great-horned owls, northern goshawks, Cooper's and red-tailed hawks, common ravens and Pacific fishers. Predators of spotted owls rarely prey on adults and usually prey on eggs, fledged young or dispersing juveniles.

The California spotted owl is recognized as a species of special concern by the California Department of Fish and Game. The northern spotted owl and the Mexican spotted owl are already protected as threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Questions and Answers:

Q. Why is the Service taking this action?

A. On April 3, 2000, we received a petition from the Center for Biological Diversity, Tucson, Arizona and Sierra Nevada Forest Protection Campaign, Sacramento, California, and 14 other groups and one individual to list as threatened or endangered the California spotted owl. On October 12, 2000, we published a 90-day finding on that petition in the Federal Register (65 FR 60605). In that publication we found that the petition presented substantial scientific or commercial information to indicate that listing the California spotted owl may be warranted and requested information and data regarding the subspecies. Due to a subsequent lack of timely action on the petition, the petitioners obtained a federal court order requiring us to make a final listing determination by February 10, 2003.

Q. The Forest Service currently has two major efforts underway that may result in changes in the anticipated impacts of the Sierra Nevada Framework Agreement. Did the Fish and Wildlife Service consider the new management review of the Framework and the Administrative Study on the Lassen and Plumas national forests in the 12-month finding?

A. Neither of these efforts have formally established management direction, so their potential effects are uncertain and subject to change before implementation. Therefore we were unable to include their potential effects in finishing the 12-month finding on the California spotted owl, which needed to be completed to meet the February 10, 2003 court ordered deadline. However, because the outcome of each of these efforts could substantially affect California spotted owls, we will be monitoring the development of management direction, offering scientific assistance, and reviewing the effects at a later date, if necessary.

Q. Could the California spotted owl be listed at a later date?

A. The Service must base its decision on whether or not to list a species by using the best scientific and commercial information *available at the time the determination is made*. Spotted owls are one of the most thoroughly studied species in the Nation. Some demographic studies suggest that the California spotted owl may be in uncertain levels of decline in parts of its range. If future demographic studies conclude that the species is declining throughout its range, this information could influence future listing decisions. We also recognize other current threats to the species, its habitat and its prey, including effects of drought and climate change on habitat; the potential spread of a new competitor/predator (the barred owl); and possible threats of disease. While we have made the decision not to propose the California spotted owl for Federal protection at this time, we will still be monitoring its management and its status, and continuing to accept additional information from all concerned governmental agencies, the scientific community, industry, or any other interested parties concerning this species.

Q. How does reduction of risk of forest fires affect spotted owl habitat?

A. Much of the existing forest in the Sierra Nevada and southern California is the product of earlier decades of repeated selection logging, combined with fire suppression. There are now extensive stands of dense regenerated forest that are used by spotted owls and that are also at risk of catastrophic fire. Especially where there is high danger to human communities, scientists and managers are reducing the risk of fire by thinning such stands, while attempting to retain the characteristics of owl habitat in some treated areas. Other habitat areas are being left untreated. In some timber stands, thinning may reduce suitability for owls in the short term, but improve the rate of growth toward high quality habitat in the long-term, while reducing the risk that the stand might be destroyed by fire. Finding a balance between short-term effects to owl habitat and long-term benefits of reducing risk of catastrophic fire is a difficult and important management challenge.

Q. Is the habitat of the California spotted owl similar to the habitat of the northern spotted owl?

A: Yes, but California spotted owls use a broader range of habitat types than the northern spotted owl in part because California spotted owl habitat is more complex due to elevation, latitude, geology, precipitation and temperature; rich vegetation; and influence of natural and man-made disturbance; especially fire and timber harvest. The emphasis on selection harvest rather than clear cutting on public lands in the range of the California spotted owl has not resulted in the sharp contrasts between logged and unlogged areas that can be found in the range of the northern spotted owl.

More questions?

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