DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR
news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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CRITICAL HABITAT PROPOSED FOR NORTHERN SPOTTED OWL

The director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that the agency would meet a court-ordered April 29 deadline to propose "critical habitat" for the northern spotted owl, which was listed as a threatened species in June 1990.

"We met the court deadline," John Turner said, "but a great deal remains to be done. We must combine conservation with common sense as we seek to forge a sensible plan that balances protection for the owl with concern for the well-being of the people of the Northwest. The Endangered Species Act expressly allows that kind of balancing in designating critical habitat, and Secretary Lujan and I are committed to making this process work."

The Act allows areas to be excluded from a proposal if the costs outweigh the benefits and if the exclusion does not result in extinction of the species, Turner added.

Critical habitat is defined under the Endangered Species Act as those areas containing the physical and biological features essential to the conservation of a species. On February 26, 1991, U.S. District Court for the Western District of Washington in Seattle ordered the Service to propose critical habitat designation for the spotted owl by April 29.

Approximately 11.6 million acres are covered under the proposal--5.1 million acres in Oregon, 3.2 million in California, and 3.3 million in Washington. Activities on much of this land are already subject to review under the Endangered Species Act for their effect on spotted owls.

"I am concerned that there is a widespread misconception that critical habitat prohibits all activities within designated areas," Turner said. "This is not the case."

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Under the Endangered Species Act, Federal agencies must consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service when actions they might take could affect a threatened or endangered species, or harm its critical habitat. However, even in cases where actions would harm a species the Act requires the Service to work with the involved agency to develop "reasonable and prudent" alternatives so the project might go forward.

Turner said that, although his agency had completed its proposal within the 9 weeks it had to meet the court order, substantial additional information would be needed before a final critical habitat designation can be made. He said the Service would seek extensive public comment on all aspects of the current proposal.

"We need to cast a much wider net than we've been able to so far," Turner said. "In particular, we need more time and better information to analyze the impact of this proposal on the economy of the Pacific Northwest. To accomplish this, I intend to form a blue-ribbon economics team drawn from both the public and private sectors. The team will have the challenging task of weighing the economic costs with the benefits of designating critical habitat so we can balance all the vital interests at stake."

Turner said the current proposal will be subject to a 30-day public comment period. After a review of all public comments, the Service will submit a revised proposal, which will, in turn, be followed by a second opportunity for public input. Public hearings in California, Washington, and Oregon are planned to gather information for the proposal.

"I don't know when the Service has dealt with an issue that has attracted such intense public interest," Turner said. "We are going to use the next weeks and months to make sure the people are heard as the process moves forward."

In drafting its critical habitat proposal, the Fish and Wildlife Service started with owl protection sites called Habitat Conservation Areas (HCAs) previously identified by the Interagency Scientific Committee (ISC) authorized by Congress in 1989. HCAs are large, contiguous blocks of current and potential owl habitat.

The HCAs identified in the ISC report of May 1990 encompassed nearly 8 million acres of Federal lands, but the protection plan recommended by the ISC could potentially affect more land than the 11.6 million acres proposed for critical habitat. This is because the ISC plan calls for timber

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management outside HCAs to protect owl habitat. Under the "50-11-40" rule prescribed by the previous plan, 50 percent of Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands outside HCAs were recommended for maintenance in stands of trees measuring at least 11 inches in diameter and at least 40 percent canopy closure. The "50-11-40" rule was designed to protect areas used by owls when they move outside HCAs.

The Service's critical habitat proposal differs from the ISC plan in that it identifies areas upon which owls depend, regardless of ownership (the ISC Committee plan focused only on public lands). Although the critical habitat proposal includes 3 million acres of private land, it differs from the ISC plan by not prescribing management requirements outside the critical habitat areas.

The proposed critical habitat rule will appear in the Federal Register the week of April 29. Public comments are encouraged particularly with regard to why habitat areas should or should not be designated; current or planned activities in habitat areas, and their possible impacts; any foreseeable economic and other impacts; economic values associated with the benefits of designating critical habitat; anticipated timber harvest activities on Federal lands other than Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands; percentage of proposed areas available for timber harvest; information on non-timber-related activities; and alternative methods to ensure that habitats are linked.

The public will have 30 days to comment on the proposal. The Fish and Wildlife Service will have 60 days to review input and develop a revised proposal for critical habitat. A second 60-day public comment period will follow publication of the revised proposal. The Service will publish a final rule on critical habitat designation within 60 days of closure of the second comment period.

Public hearings in the Pacific Northwest will be held during each of the comment periods following publication of the proposals in the Federal Register. Specific information on dates and locations will be announced later.

Comments and information should be submitted to: Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Eastside Federal Complex, 911 NE. 11th Ave., Portland, OR 97232-4181.

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BIRD OF PREY

Spotted Owl

(Strix occidentalis caurina)

The northern spotted owl is a medium-sized predatory bird that lives in the cool, moist woodlands of the Pacific Northwest. It has a round face and distinctive, dark, brown eyes, but no ear tufts like those of the great horned owl. The overall color of its feathers is chestnut brown, and the tail feathers appear barred with lighter brown and white. White and brown spotting occurs on the underparts and breast. Female owls are usually larger in size than males, which is typical of many predatory birds such as eagles, hawks, falcons, and vultures. Predatory animals obtain food by killing and consuming other animals.

Spotted owls do not migrate, and generally remain within the same area throughout the year. Historically, the range of northern spotted owls extended from southwestern British Columbia, Canada, through western Washington, western Oregon, and the coast areas of California to San Francisco Bay. Their present range is similar, although they are now uncommon in certain areas. California spotted owls and Mexican spotted owls are two other closely related kinds found in the Unites States.

Northern spotted owls live in undisturbed Douglas fir and mixed conifer forests with trees that may be 200 or more years old. Biologists refer to these natural areas as "old-growth" forests. Old-growth forests are characterized by fallen trees, trees with broken tops, and mature and overmature trees. Different-aged trees provide the owls with nesting sites, food, shelter, and protection from predators.

Both the understory and overstory of the forest are important to the well-being of northern spotted owls. The understory of a forest is made up of plants that grow close to the ground, while the overstory is the tall tops of trees. By resting, or "roosting", in the deep shade of the understory during warm weather, the northern spotted owl reduces its exposure to high temperatures. Roosting in the overstory during periods of cold and wet weather enables the owls to avoid the lower temperatures near the ground and increases their exposure to the sun's warmth. This behavior helps spotted owls to maintain stable body temperatures.

Like most species of owls, spotted owls do not build nests. Instead they use the tops of broken trees or cavities in tree trunks that are caused by a disease called heart rot. Spotted owls in the southerly end of their range will use old eagle or raven nests on cliffs, or natural ledges or caves in cliffs.

Northern spotted owls are fairly tame and primarily "nocturnal". A nocturnal animal is most active at night. Owls begin to hunt just after sunset and stop shortly before sunrise. Rodents such as flying squirrels, woodrats, and gophers are the major food of owls. They will also eat birds, insects, and reptiles.

Spotted owls hunt by sitting quietly on elevated perches and then swooping down upon their unsuspecting prey. They store excess food and retrieve it later, a habit observed most often during the period of care for Young owls.

Spotted owls mate for life. As the time to lay eggs approaches in late March and early April, the female spends more time around the nest site, and the male brings food to her.

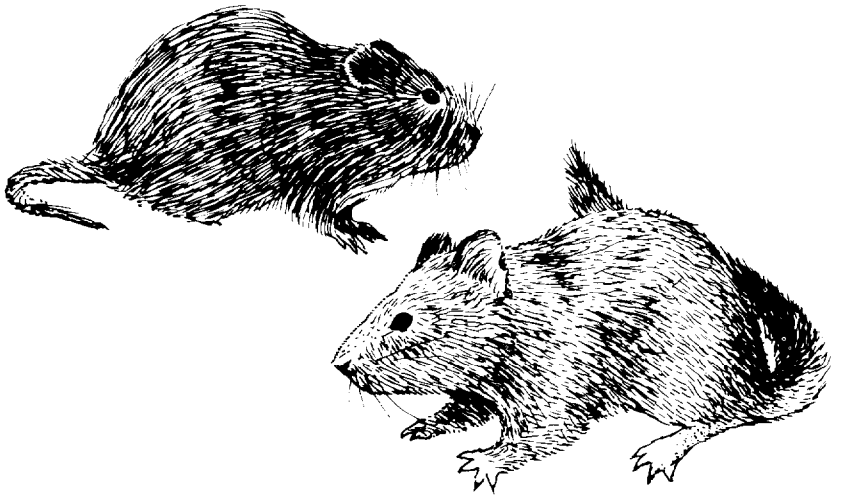
She usually lays two or three pure white eggs which hatch in about 30 days. The young owls, or "owlets", begin to perch on branches and ledges two or three weeks after hatching, but they still depend on their parents for food. The male does most of the hunting and the female feeds the prey to the young.

As the owlets mature, They begin to roost away from their parents and make longer movements at night. During this period, they develop their skills as fliers and hunters. By September or October, the young owls leave and begin to fend for themselves and look for mates.

Very few animals prey on adult spotted owls; however, the great horned owl is considered a major predator on owlets. Ravens, goshawks, Coopers hawks, and red-tailed hawks have also been known to kill and eat them.

Although numbers have declined, northern spotted owls still occur throughout a broad area. But to ensure future survival, the northern spotted owl needs special management care. Demand for all types of forest products have depleted old-growth forests. Biologists estimate that most old-growth timber stands within significant portions of the owl's range will be harvested within the next 20 to 40 years.

Presently the Federal Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service are developing land use plans which will provide the opportunity to manage areas of habitat to maintain a viable spotted owl population in the Northwest. In addition, the northern spotted owl is considered a management "indicator" species for wildlife diversity in mature and old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest. Managing forest habitats for owls will also provide many other wildlife species with places to live.



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