

Newcomer Presents a New Peril

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Revered among environmentalists and disdained by foresters, spotted owls are notorious for their role in the battle over the ancient forests of the Pacific Coast.

The main threat to these owls is the loss of habitat caused by logging, but the spread of another owl into their domain has added to their problems.

SIBLEY ON BIRDS

The interlopers, barred owls, are a predominantly eastern species that has moved west during the last century. With this range expansion has come a concern that hybridization with the newcomers will add to the spotted owls' problems.

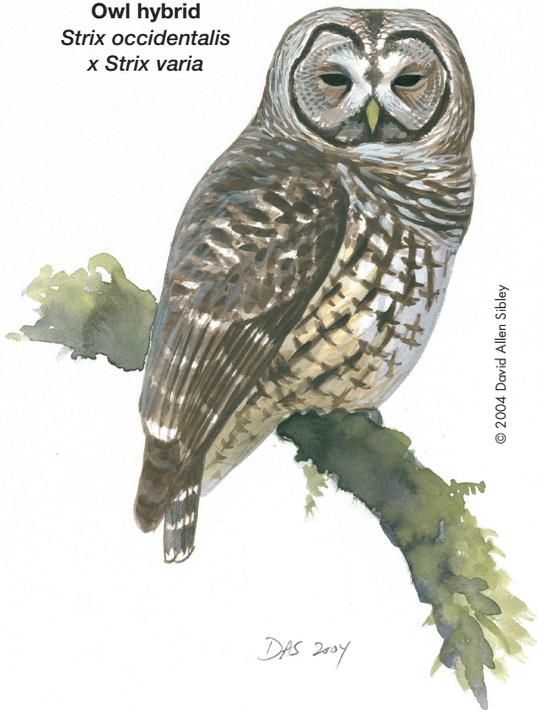
Exactly how often the two interbreed is unclear because hybrids and their offspring can be hard to identify based on their plumage.

Research just published in the journal *Conservation Biology* by Susan Haig and colleagues at the U.S. Geological Survey has shown that simple DNA tests can be used to make identifications. This breakthrough will help researchers to determine how widespread hybridization is.

Other studies indicate that spotted owls avoid areas where the barred owls settle, probably because they cannot compete for territories. Barred owls are also known to prey on smaller owls, so the somewhat smaller spotted owls may avoid them for that reason.

While the full impact of these interactions remain unknown, adding new problems to the extensive habitat loss caused by humans can only add to the spotted owl's precarious position.

Spotted-Barred
Owl hybrid
Strix occidentalis
x Strix varia



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