

Owl in a day's work

Imagine walking into your backyard and discovering a baby owl on the ground. That's what happened to one person on Vancouver Island. She found a young barred owl huddled at the base of a tree with his eyes closed. Right away she knew something was wrong. She called the BC SPCA Wild Animal Rehabilitation Centre (Wild ARC) for help.

The owlet most likely fell from the nest that his parents had moved into – a home left behind by an eagle or a hawk. Owls are clever finders. They seek out abandoned nests from other birds. The trouble is, these old nests are no longer as stable as they could be and – whoops! – babies can fall out.

It isn't known how long the owlet was on the ground, but he arrived at Wild ARC dehydrated and underweight. His feathers were infested with parasites and his ears were full of maggots. His left wing was drooping, but thankfully not broken.

For two weeks Wild ARC staff cared for the owlet. They wrapped his injured wing for support and it improved within days. Medication eliminated the parasites and prevented infection in his ears. To help him rehydrate and reach a healthy weight, staff needed to get him to eat. The stress of being away from his parents made him unwilling to feed himself. Even tricks like playing owl calls and providing an owl stuffy as a friend

didn't help. In the end staff had to feed the young owl by hand. But they knew a quick reunion with his parents would be his best chance at long-term survival.

Once ready, Wild ARC called on friend Jeff Krieger at Alternative Wildlife Solutions. Jeff works to solve wildlife issues humanely, and has some creative techniques! Jeff brought the owlet back to the original nest site. Then, under the watchful eye of the mother owl, he secured a laundry basket to the tree. Once the basket was in place, Jeff lifted the owlet into the new "nest" and stood back to see if mom would return to her baby. Almost immediately, she flew over and began preening her baby's feathers!

For weeks after this happy reunion, the owlet's parents continued to care for and prepare him for life in the wild. Wild ARC staff and their friend Jeff had done their job!



PHOTOS: ADVENTURES BY HIP



the Spotted Owl



ALL SPOTTED OWL PHOTOS: JARED HOBBS/HOBBS PHOTO IMAGES CO.

The Northern Spotted Owl is Canada's most endangered bird. Found only in southern British Columbia's low elevation old-growth coniferous forests, the spotted owl requires a huge home range – the equivalent of 3,000 soccer fields. Unfortunately, spotted owls are quickly running out of habitat due to clear-cut logging.

The spotted owl stands 40 to 43 cm tall, weighs between half to just under one kilogram with a wing span up to 120 cm (hold your arms out, your arm span is probably less!). They have **dark brown eyes** and **yellowish-green bills**. This placid bird has chocolate brown plumage, heavily spotted with white on the breast and belly and less on the wings, back and head. These markings camouflage the spotted owl against tree bark protecting them from their natural **predators – great horned owls and red-tailed hawks**.

SIT, WAIT & SWOOP PREDATORS

Spotted owls are patient predators, waiting on a favourite branch until they see or hear something below. They are virtually silent when they fly as their short broad wings produce heavy methodical beats. They swoop down, catch their prey and return to their nest to feast on the catch. Spotted owls prefer flying squirrels but also eat rodents, birds and large insects.



IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS:

Extinct: a species that no longer exists.

Extirpated: a species that no longer exists in the wild in one geographic region but occurs elsewhere.

Endangered: a wildlife species that is facing imminent extirpation or extinction.

Threatened: a wildlife species that is likely to become an endangered species if nothing is done to reverse the factors leading to its extirpation or extinction.

Special concern: a wildlife species that may become a threatened or an endangered species because of a combination of biological characteristics and identified threats such as habitat destruction, food factors, disease, competition, human activity, etc.



SOUND BYTE

Typical call for the spotted owl? "Whoop wu-hu hoo."

Female calling her mate? A loud "Co-weeep!"

Plus, did you know?...spotted owls can hear rodents scurrying on the forest floor up to 100 metres away!

REPRODUCTION:

- ▶ Mate for life, breeding every second year
- ▶ 2 to 3 eggs are laid in the spring
- ▶ Female owl sits on the eggs for 30 days before they hatch
- ▶ Juveniles start flying at about 6 weeks of age and become independent by fall to find their own territory
- ▶ Owls only start mating when they are 2 to 3 years old

THE IMPORTANCE OF OLD-GROWTH FOREST HABITAT

The spotted owl's old-growth forest habitat has trees of varying ages averaging from 140-years-old to some as old as 1,000 years. There is a diversity of standing, dead and fallen trees along with lots of woody debris on the forest floor. Old-growth forests provide a canopy that regulates the forest temperature and provides the spotted owl with places to nest and hide from predators.

Most importantly, since spotted owls do not make their own nests, they need to use the hollows of dead old-growth trees (called snags) or take over abandoned nests of other large birds such as hawks, eagles or ravens.

ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION

Spotted owls have lived in old-growth forests for thousands of years, however, in 1991 scientists could only find 100 pairs of spotted owls and 10 years later less than 50 pairs were found. By 2005, only 6 pairs and 11 singles were left.

WHY? HABITAT DESTRUCTION

The practice of clear-cutting, the cutting down of all the trees in a selected area, is rapidly destroying spotted owl habitat. The forests are being logged because the low elevation old-growth forests are easy to get to and the wood is extremely valuable.



Clear-cutting decimates spotted owl territory reducing the huge forests to small fragmented islands too small to support the owls. When young owls leave their nests to find their own territories they are forced to fly through open spaces, left by clear-cuts, where there aren't many places to hide or prey to eat.

Sadly, it may well be too late for the Northern Spotted Owl in British Columbia. Dwindling old-growth forest and the fragmentation of existing forests, increased predation and decreasing levels of prey for the owls, puts estimates for the extirpation of the spotted owl to 2010.



COURTESY J.S. WILLIAMS

When spotted owls lose their forests to logging, other animals also lose their homes. The spotted owl is an "indicator" species, which means that scientists use spotted owls to gauge how the rest of the forests' species are doing. In BC, studies indicate that at least 22 species that share the forests with spotted owls are also endangered.

TAKE ACTION:

Tell 10 other people about the spotted owl and how humans are destroying their habitat. Write a letter to your local newspaper and/or government officials to express how you feel about the spotted owl and the clear-cutting of old-growth forests. Take Bark! to school and share this article with your teacher and classmates.

