

Barred Owls and Belonging

By Tim Fox

Evening settles in over my second camp in the autumn old growth. Time again for a fire. I fetch dry twigs, remove two more sheets of newspaper from my backpack and carefully construct a kindling tee pee. As I'm leaning the last pieces on, a barred owl calls from very close by. The cadence is atypical, incomplete; rather than the usual, "who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?" this one says, "who cooks for you, cooks for you?"

Once, I would have felt saddened to hear this voice in this place; visitors on field trips used to stop here to see the spotted owl pair that made this old growth grove their home. Those spotted owls have been gone for years, apparently driven away by their larger, more aggressive cousin from the east, the barred owl.

Barred owls arrived in the northwest only about thirty-five or so years ago. They crossed over through Canada, reached the Pacific Ocean and headed south down the Cascade and Coast ranges. In appearance, barred owls differ from spotted owls mainly in their slightly larger size and in having vertically barred breast feathers instead of light spots.

During my eight years as a field research assistant on a northern spotted owl demography study, I saw site after site switch tenants. In a couple places, fertile hybrids, called sparred owls, turned up, but these were extremely rare. Usually, after a short period of overlap, *Strix varia* invariably replaced *Strix occidentalis*. And I resented them for it.

There is something special — I hesitate to say even magical — about spotted owls. And it is for them that I feel the deepest empathy, possibly in part because I spent twelve years working with them, but I think there's more to it than that. Maybe, my strong affinity has to do with their old growth association. This humbling, awe-inspiring ecosystem has, for me, always been the underlying motivation for learning about, and from, the owl. The ecosystem in itself is too much — too complex, too big, too variable to fully grasp, but crystallized into the owl, the possibility arises for humans to at least, in some small way, get our heads around it. It may be that, as Jack Ward Thomas and others have said, "Nature is not only more complex than we think, it is more complex than we can think." But our hearts are not so bounded.

And the arrival of the barred owl to the old growth forest at the apparent expense of the spotted, made my heart hurt. Then, on a February day in 2009, my awareness changed in a single revelatory moment. I was near my house, walking along a stretch of Horse Creek Road that runs through an old growth grove with over-story trees dated to the 16th century.

Above the rustling of my coat and the thudding of my footfalls on pavement, I heard the faint call of an owl. I couldn't pin down the species, but the interplay of tone and towering trees gave the impression that the forest itself was calling. I assumed a spotted owl, stopped and listened. The forest called again.

With the voice of a barred owl.

In that instant, my opinion of barred owls underwent a profound shift, which I wrote down in a pocket notebook I had with me at the time:

Should the old growth ecosystem endure, even if the spotted owl gives way to the barred, the forest will retemper the barred in form and spirit to fit the mood of the trees as the spotted owl now does. It will be a softening, a quieting, a recasting for a new role in a different play of life and light and ages.

Given time, the forest will do the same to inhabitant humans as befits our kind.

The barred owl calls again, drawing my mind back to the task at hand. I ignite the paper, careful not to topple the arrangement of sticks above it, and blow life into my little fire. In the owl's voice is the certainty of belonging. Human memory may recall the arrival of the species some four decades past, but to this bird, one or two generations removed from that event, *varia* has always been here. In the same light, so has *sapiens*. If we add memory and substitute culture for species, this land has another relatively recent story of displacement to tell, a story that seems infinitely more tragic and complex, but is really not so different, both in source and solution.

The forest lost, and needs to recover, human voices in tune with it.

That recovery is, I think, under way, in everyone who comes here — researches and reflectors alike — to learn not only about the forest, but from it, about ourselves, in relation to it, as part of it, dwellers in its shadows, seekers of its wisdom, students of its owls.

I blow again into the smoldering paper. The flames blossom, creep up into the sticks and take hold.