



---

---

# Northern Spotted Owl Annual Report

## 2023

---

---

January 31, 2024



Cover photo: Northern spotted on HRC lands (photo credit: HRC Forest Sciences).

---

**TWENTY FIFTH ANNUAL REPORT**

**Submitted to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the California  
Department of Fish and Wildlife, the NOAA Fisheries, and the California  
Department of Forestry and Fire Protection**

**By**

**Humboldt Redwood Company, LLC**

**To fulfill the requirements of the Habitat Conservation Plan, 6.2, Northern  
Spotted Owl Conservation Plan, Permit TE-828950, Federal Recovery Permit  
TE-026089-7, and CA SCP SC-004496**

**January 31, 2024**

---

**Project Managers/ Primary Authors**

*Brad S. Mauney*

---

**Brad Mauney**

*Sal Chinnici*

---

**Sal Chinnici**

---

**Project Description**

**Title:** Northern Spotted Owl Annual Report 2023

**Purpose:** Northern spotted owl HCP monitoring

**Date Initiated:** March 1999

**Projected End Date:** Ongoing

**Managers:** Sal Chinnici, Director, Forest Sciences, and Brad Mauney, Senior Scientist

**Report Summary**

During the 2023 northern spotted owl survey season a total of 877 calling stations were used to conduct nighttime surveys of the sample quadrats and Timber Harvesting Plans (THP). A total of 697 daytime status and follow-up visits were conducted. All core sites and all activity sites within the sample quadrats were visited to determine occupancy, reproductive status, and reproductive success (if applicable).

Management objective 1 of the HCP, which requires the maintenance of a minimum of 108 activity sites in the HCP area, was met in 2023 with 108 total occupied activity sites including the 108 core sites. There are currently 253 total activity sites (occupied and unoccupied) on the property. Management objective 2, which calls for maintenance of spotted owl pairs on a five-year rolling average of 80% of core activity sites, was not met in 2023 with a five-year rolling average of 52%. The pair occupancy rate for 2023 alone was 44% (47 of the 108 core sites were occupied by a pair of spotted owls). Management objective 3 requires the maintenance of a five-year rolling average reproductive rate of at least 0.61 fledged young per pair for the core sites (for those pairs monitored to determine reproductive output). Nesting activity was verified for 12 of the 47 pairs (of the 108 core sites), and a total of 21 young were fledged, resulting in a reproductive rate of 0.45 in 2023. The five-year rolling average of the reproductive rate for the 25<sup>th</sup> year of the HCP is 0.47, below the metric for management objective 3.

HRC continues to have concerns about various threats to our spotted owl population, represented primarily by barred owls. The continuing invasion of barred owls has the potential to reduce or eliminate the HRC spotted owl population regardless of other effects.

We currently recommend continuing the same monitoring strategies for the 2024 season.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... 3

INTRODUCTION ..... 5

STUDY AREA AND METHODS ..... 7

    Monitoring, Timber Harvesting Plan (THP), and Site Preparation Surveys ..... 8

        Monitoring Surveys .....8

        Timber Harvesting Plan (THP) Surveys .....10

        Site Preparation Surveys .....11

    Activity Site Determination ..... 12

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION ..... 17

    Barred Owls ..... 17

    West Nile Virus (WNV) ..... 25

    Sudden Oak Death (SOD)..... 25

    Follow-up Visits..... 27

    Management Objectives 1 and 4..... 28

    Management Objective 2 ..... 30

    Management Objective 3 ..... 30

    Activity Site Levels of Protection..... 34

        Habitat Conditions .....36

    Banding Program ..... 42

    Regional Trends ..... 43

RECOMMENDATIONS ..... 44

    Surveys..... 44

    Banding ..... 45

    Barred Owls ..... 45

    Scientific Panel/Management Objectives ..... 45

**PROJECT REPORT DISTRIBUTION LIST**

Susan Sniado  
California Department of Fish & Wildlife  
Northern California - North Coast Region  
610 2nd Street  
Eureka, CA 95501

John Peters  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Arcata Fish and Wildlife Office  
1655 Heindon Rd.  
Arcata, CA 95521

Dominik Schwab  
Cal Fire  
135 Ridgeway Avenue  
Santa Rosa, 95401

Clarence Hostler  
NOAA Fisheries  
1655 Heindon Road  
Arcata, 95521

Chris Curtis  
Cal Fire  
118 South Fortuna Blvd  
Fortuna, CA 95540



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The year 2023 was the twenty-fifth year of surveys and monitoring under the Northern Spotted Owl Conservation Plan (Habitat Conservation Plan or HCP §6.2) of the Humboldt Redwood Company (HRC) HCP. The intent of this report is to briefly summarize the methods, results, and management objectives of this conservation plan. As with previous reports, relevant appendices have been copied to a CD along with this report.

During the 2023 survey season we continued to rely upon the changes in survey methods resulting from the HCP minor modifications of 2002. Monitoring surveys were accomplished using 390 calling stations to cover all potential spotted owl habitat within the 2023 sample quadrats. Overall, a total of 877 calling stations were used to conduct nighttime surveys of the quadrats and Timber Harvesting Plan (THP) surveys. Follow-up visits were conducted to the locale of night contacts to determine the status and location of the owls contacted. A total of 697 daytime status and follow-up visits were conducted. All core sites, and all activity sites within the sample quadrats, were visited to determine occupancy, reproductive status, and reproductive success (if applicable).

Management objective 1 of the HCP requires the maintenance of a minimum of 108 activity sites<sup>1</sup> in the HCP area over the life of the permit. There were 108 total occupied activity sites in 2023, including the 108 core sites. Therefore, management objective 1 was met in 2023. Management objective 2 calls for maintenance of spotted owl pairs on a five-year rolling average of 80% of the core activity sites in the HCP area. In 2023, 47 of the 108 cores sites were occupied by a pair of spotted owls, for a pair occupancy rate of 44% (0.435). The five-year rolling average for the occupancy rate by pairs is now 52% (0.519). Management objective 3 requires the maintenance of a five-year rolling average reproductive rate of at least 0.61 fledged young per pair for the core sites (for those pairs monitored to determine reproductive output). During the 2023 breeding season, 47 pairs (of the 108 core sites) were monitored for nesting activity and reproductive output. Nesting activity was verified for 12 of the 47 pairs. A total of 21 young were fledged,

---

<sup>1</sup> **Activity site** (or activity center) is the area surrounding and including the nest tree or primary roost tree of a pair of spotted owls or single spotted owl, and where they are consistently located.

resulting in a reproductive rate of 0.45. The five-year rolling average of the reproductive rate for the twenty-fifth year of the HCP was 0.47; not meeting the target for management objective 3.

In February of 2014 HRC and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) completed a minor modification to the HCP that resulted in an additional timing requirement for THP surveys and an adaptive management requirement for occupancy and probability of detection analysis of HRC spotted owl surveys. Further detail is provided below.

Because the northern spotted owl was elevated at that time to the status of a candidate for state listing, HRC requested and received a Consistency Determination from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department or CDFW) that the conservation measures of the HCP are consistent with the California Endangered Species Act.

HRC continues to have concerns about various threats to our spotted owl population, represented primarily by barred owls, but also including West Nile Virus, potential poisoning threats from trespass and marijuana grows on adjacent ownerships, and Sudden Oak Death. Individually or in concert these stressors have the potential to reduce or eliminate the HRC spotted owl population and its habitat regardless of HCP effects. At present, the actual effect of these other factors on the HRC spotted owl population is unknown, however, the negative effects of the barred owl invasion have been well-documented throughout the range of the northern spotted owl.

We currently recommend continuing the same monitoring strategies for the 2024 season.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Northern Spotted Owl (spotted owl or NSO) twenty-fifth Annual Report is to present the results of surveys and analyses of management objectives for the northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) on lands of the Humboldt Redwood Company, LLC (HRC) covered by the HRC Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS, the Service) Permit TE828950-0, and for NSO banding, Federal Recovery Permit TE-026089-7, and CA SCP SC-004496.

The reporting period is from 1 January 2023 to 1 January 2024, and covers surveys conducted from March to August 2023. The year 2023 was the twenty-fifth year of surveys and monitoring under the Northern Spotted Owl Conservation Plan (HCP §6.2). Regarding annual surveys, or censuses, HCP §6.2.2 # 2 states:

*Monitoring data shall be provided annually to the NSOSRP (Northern Spotted Owl Scientific Review Panel), the USFWS, and CDFW (California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Department).*

As stated in HCP §6.2, the overall conservation strategy for spotted owls is a habitat-based approach that includes the harvest, retention, and recruitment of habitat and essential habitat elements at both the landscape and activity site levels. The strategy also includes measures for disturbance minimization, population monitoring, and adaptive management techniques.

During the twenty-fifth year of HCP implementation, the northern spotted owl program continues to follow the “quadrat” sampling approach and minor modifications approved in 2002 to monitor the “core” owl sites for occupancy and reproduction.

These minor modifications approved in 2002 consisted of three primary components: 1) clarification that the HCP’s spotted owl management objectives apply to the “core” (i.e., Level 1 and Level 2 owl sites, 2) modification of the census techniques to concentrate on sampling “quadrats” made up of watershed units on the covered lands, and 3) modification of survey methods for site preparation activities, recognizing that these activities are different in nature from timber harvesting relative to breeding season

disturbance. These minor modifications to the HCP have been appended to previous reports and are incorporated here by reference.

During a September 2003 meeting we also continued discussions with the USFWS and the CDFW regarding the evaluation for retention or removal of activity sites. These discussions eventually led to the development of a mutually agreed-upon survey methodology for removal of unoccupied sites from the HCP list of activity sites.

In 2009 the Habitat Retention Area (HRA) strategy was fully implemented. The intent of the HRAs is to provide long-term nesting and roosting habitat around the most productive NSO activity centers. The USFWS, CDFW, and HRC reviewed habitat and other maps, aerial photography, and known NSO locations to identify HRAs for 80 Level 1 NSO activity centers. The HRAs were developed for activity centers that have a history of occupancy and reproduction. Because a proportion of these sites may be unoccupied in some years, the HRAs are intended to continue to provide nesting and roosting habitat during these unoccupied years given that they may become reoccupied over time. If a Level 1 HRA is unoccupied, a replacement Level 1 activity center is selected from other available sites meeting required criteria. There are currently forty-three unoccupied HRAs; consequently, we are currently maintaining a total of 124 Level One sites (there are 81 Level 1 HRAs).

On 27 December 2013 the California Fish and Game Commission adopted the Department's findings that the listing of the northern spotted owl as a threatened or endangered species under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) may be warranted, resulting in candidate status for the spotted owl during the status review period. Under CESA, a candidate species receives protection from "take" as if it were listed, until such time as a status review is conducted and a final listing determination is made.

HRC, the Service, and the Department discussed NSO management and monitoring considering this change in status and agreed to an HCP minor modification regarding THP surveys and HCP adaptive management. HRC agreed to conduct an occupancy and

probability of detection analysis of our NSO survey data from 2003 – 2014 to achieve a better understanding of how many daytime and/or nighttime surveys are necessary to detect spotted owls, considering the presence of barred owls in the region. The analysis was completed prior to the 2015 survey season and can be revisited every five years if needed.

Subsequently, because the northern spotted owl is a federally covered species under the HRC HCP, HRC applied for a Consistency Determination through the Department and received a concurrence letter on 20 February 2014. On 26 August 2016, the California Fish and Game Commission voted to list the NSO as a threatened species in California.

This brief introduction of the 2023 spotted owl program is expanded below. In particular, this report discusses: 1) the study area and methods used in the assessment of spotted owls within that study area, 2) results of the survey efforts, 3) the meaning of the results both biologically and with respect to the management objectives of the HCP, and 4) HRC's year 2024 action plan for the spotted owl conservation plan.

## **STUDY AREA AND METHODS**

The HRC HCP covered lands currently encompass approximately 209,000 acres and are located in coastal Humboldt County in northern California (Map 1). The HCP area is characterized by mountainous terrain, a maritime climate, and dense coniferous forests, primarily dominated by the coast redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*) and Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) forest-types.

In general, field survey methods for spotted owls are conducted following guidelines in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service protocol, "Protocol for Surveying Proposed Management Activities That May Impact Northern Spotted Owls" (USFWS 1992).

During the 2011 survey season we began to incorporate changes proposed by the USFWS for northern spotted owl surveys in a revised protocol (2011 Northern Spotted Owl Survey Protocol, USFWS 2011a). For example, we used digitally recorded and amplified spotted owl calls consisted of a mix of standard territorial calls (e.g., 4 and 5 note calls), contact hoots and whistles, and agitated calls digitally recorded and broadcast using

recorded call sequences that are loaded onto cell phones and paired with a high-quality speaker (TronsMart), or Fox Pro ® “Fury” or “Firestorm” electronic callers.

For all survey methods, when a spotted owl response is evoked during the nighttime surveys, presence, and if possible, status is determined with a follow-up daytime visit.

Follow-up visits were conducted using daytime walk-ins of the habitat to attempt to locate nesting or roosting owls. Owl sites were checked to determine occupancy and nesting status. The surveyor hikes in to a known historic NSO activity site, or returns to the site of a survey contact, and uses voice calling and/or amplified calls to contact the spotted owls which may be nesting or roosting at the site. The suitable habitat in an area roughly 0.5 mile around the previous contact is used as a search area. When a single owl, or a pair of spotted owls, is contacted on the follow-up visit the surveyor offers prey items (domestic mice) in an attempt to establish breeding status.

### ***MONITORING, TIMBER HARVESTING PLAN (THP), AND SITE PREPARATION SURVEYS***

As discussed above, minor modifications to the HCP that were approved by the CDFW and USFWS in 2002 revised the survey methodology for monitoring, THP, and site preparation activities. For monitoring, or census purposes, a quadrat sampling design was implemented to replace a complete census. THP survey methods were refined as a result of experience from the first three years of HCP implementation. In addition, surveys for site preparation activities were modified in recognition of the characteristics and duration of activities that are involved, and the potential for disturbance to spotted owls during the breeding season.

#### ***Monitoring Surveys***

The Northern Spotted Owl Conservation Plan, HCP §6.2.2, # 2 reads:

*PALCO shall conduct complete annual censuses to monitor all activity sites on the ownership and to determine numbers of pairs, nesting pairs, and reproductive rates. PALCO may use a sampling methodology, rather than a complete census, provided that the sampling proposal has been reviewed by the NSOSRP and approved by the USFWS and CDFW.*

*Monitoring data shall be provided annually to the NSOSRP, the USFWS, and CDFW.*

The USFWS, CDFW, NSOSRP, and PALCO had agreed that using a sampling methodology, rather than a complete census is likely to have benefits for the population of spotted owls on HRC's covered lands as well as for HRC staff. Following agreement between PALCO, the USFWS, and the CDFW that the HCP management objectives (HCP §6.2.1) for pair occupancy and reproduction apply to the core sites as in HCP §6.2, Table 7, the objectives of a sampling methodology were therefore clarified. Thus, the objectives of sampling a subset of the covered lands each year via night surveys include:

- Tracking known sites within the quadrats surveyed,
- Finding new sites that may be used as part of the minimum level (core) sites,
- Inventorying sites related to management activities, and
- Tracking the number and location of sites within a given geographical area over time, to help provide information on the effects of management activities.

The quadrat approach relies on large hydrologic areas containing multiple owl territories as the basic sampling units (Map 1). The hydrologic units are based on significant watershed areas (e.g., Freshwater Creek, Elk River), using the dividing ridgelines as the boundaries between units. Where necessary to maximize sampling efficiency, hydrologic units were combined into logical units, resulting in a total of 20 quadrats. In other words, if a hydrologic unit on the periphery of the covered lands contained a relatively small portion of HRC covered property, then it was incorporated into an adjoining, logical unit. During the 2023 season, quadrats 2, 7, 9 and 11 were surveyed (Elk River, Stitz Creek on the north side of the Lower Eel River drainage, Root Creek in the Van Duzen River drainage, and Bear Creek in the Lower Eel River drainage). The basic methods and reporting requirements of the quadrat sampling approach are as follows:

1. Using USFWS night survey protocol techniques, conduct three survey visits of all suitable habitat in the four quadrats for that sample year.
2. Use daytime follow-up visits (again using USFWS techniques) to check occupancy and reproductive status of all known sites in the quadrat (including any core sites).

3. In addition to the visits in item # 2, use daytime follow-up visits to check occupancy and status of any sites contacted on the night surveys.
4. In addition to calculating the values of pair occupancy and reproductive rate for the management objectives of HCP §6.2.1 for the core sites, also calculate the results of the same values for all sites monitored in the quadrats. These combined data will be used to track pair occupancy and reproductive trends over time and will be compared to information gathered on spotted owls at other study sites in northern California.
5. Prior to 1 June each year HRC shall report to the USFWS and the CDFW on the quantity and distribution of suitable spotted owl habitat in the quadrats and on the covered lands as a whole. This information will be used to help understand potential reasons why management objectives may not be met, and potential means of correction (e.g., HCP §6.2.3 # 6).
6. All survey and status visit results, as well as habitat information from item # 5, will be reported annually in the HCP Annual Report, due each year on 1 February.

### ***Timber Harvesting Plan (THP) Surveys***

The methods for surveying THPs in HCP §6.2.2 # 3 also underwent minor modification in 2002, as a result of discussions and agreement between the CDFW, USFWS and PALCO. Refinements in the THP surveys were primarily in the areas of timing of surveys, and clarification in procedural language. The modifications have been included in previous reports and correspondence and are incorporated here by reference.

Additions were made to the THP survey language in 2009, and again in 2012, to clarify the meaning of “continuous operations”, as follows:

- (a) *Note: HRC and the Wildlife Agencies agree that in this context, “maintained continuously” means that:*
  - i) *Operations can only be shut down for a maximum of 5 consecutive days, including weekends,*
  - ii) *Only 3 of the 5 shut down days can be non-weather related,*



- iii) *Operations must occur for 3 consecutive days between any consecutive 5 day shutdown period, and*
  - iv) *During any consecutive fixed 10 day period beginning February 21 there must be at least 5 days of operations.*
  - v) *If item iii) is applied, there must be 5 consecutive days of operations following the 5-day shutdown, 3-day operations, 5-day shutdown event.*
- (b) *In this context hauling of logs or equipment does not constitute “continuing operations”.*

Most recently, the February 2014 HCP minor modification required a change in survey timing, and an adaptive management requirement for a survey analysis, with the results intended to guide future survey effort.

THP survey modification:

*For new operations, except site preparation, initiated in the period beginning February 21 and ending on or before August 31, the THP area and a 1,000-foot buffer shall be surveyed. Three survey visits, each separated by at least one week, shall occur prior to the start of operations, but after March 1. At least one visit shall occur on or after April 1. Survey efforts may be modified pursuant to HCP Section 6.2.3, Item 8 within the constraints of a minimum of three visits, and a maximum of six visits range. (Minor modification added language is underlined).*

Adaptive management addition:

8. *In 2014, and at five-year intervals thereafter, HRC shall conduct an analysis of spotted owl occupancy and detection probabilities using their accumulated survey data. The analysis shall include appropriate covariates for other factors that explain detectability. The Wildlife Agencies will review the appropriateness of the analysis methods. The results will be evaluated to determine the appropriate number of night and/or daytime survey visits necessary to maintain  $\geq .90$  confidence interval, (e.g.,  $CI = 1 - (1 - p_{survey})^{n.surveys}$ ) to detect a spotted owl, if present, for new operations initiated in the period beginning February 21 and ending on or before August 31. Survey efforts will be modified accordingly to maintain this confidence interval, within the constraints of a minimum of three visits, and a maximum of six visits range. HRC, the Wildlife Agencies, and/or the NSOSRP will meet to review the results and determine modifications, if necessary.*

During the 2023 survey season, for new timber operations we conducted six nighttime surveys of the THP area and buffer. There were 36 THPs that received six nighttime surveys and a subset of 12 THPs that received continuous operations surveys.

## **SITE PREPARATION SURVEYS**

Site preparation activities, e.g., those activities undertaken following timber harvest and in preparation for reforestation of a site, typically have little potential for disturbance of breeding, and are of relatively short duration (the methods of surveying for spotted owls for these kinds of activities also were subject to minor modification during 2002). Again, the surveys as described in the modified HCP §6.2.2 # 3 have been appended to previous reports. There were no site preparation-specific surveys conducted in 2023.

## **ACTIVITY SITE DETERMINATION**

As in past years under the HCP, occupancy and reproductive criteria used were consistent with those outlined by the USFWS protocol, along with guidance received from the USFWS and the CDFW. Further, in 2002 the CDFW, USFWS and PALCO discussed and agreed upon a method for determining the establishment and also possibly the location of activity centers based on audio contacts only, and in 2003 agreed upon standards for removal of unoccupied sites. These methods have been discussed and appended in previous reports.

Following a resolution meeting and discussion with the Department, Service and the HCP Monitors in the fall of 2013, Appendix D of this report was modified to include additional information regarding unoccupied activity centers. Based on those discussions and using the guidance of the “Decision Tree”, the following sites have been identified as unoccupied. However, considering the invasion of barred owls we opted for a conservative approach in 2023 and have not removed these sites from the GIS layer for 2023-2024 (site location, watershed):

**Table 1.** HCP NSO Sites that met the criteria for unoccupied status but were retained.

AC	Level One with HRA	Current Protocol Status	2022 Protection Level	2023 Protection Level	Level Change
3	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
7	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
9	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
11	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
13	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
14	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
16	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
18	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
19	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
20	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
21	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
22	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
26	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
28	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
32	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
33	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
38	N/A	N/C	TWO	THREE	*
41	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
44	N/A	N/C	TWO	THREE	*
45	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
46	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
47	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
52	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
54	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
58	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
59	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
61	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
62	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
67	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
69	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
70	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
71	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
74	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
78	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	

AC	Level One with HRA	Current Protocol Status	2022 Protection Level	2023 Protection Level	Level Change
81	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
82	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
86	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
90	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
101	N/A	N/C	ONE	THREE	*
102	N/A	N/C	TWO	THREE	*
103	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
108	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
112	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
119	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
123	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
124	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
126	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
130	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
132	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
134	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
138	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
146	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
147	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
152	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
153	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
154	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
159	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
160	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
161	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
163	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
167	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
169	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
170	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
175	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
182	N/A	N/C	TWO	THREE	*
189	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
195	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
196	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
197	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
205	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	

AC	Level One with HRA	Current Protocol Status	2022 Protection Level	2023 Protection Level	Level Change
206	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
208	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
209	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
212	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
214	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
216	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
217	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
218	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
219	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
220	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
221	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
227	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
230	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
233	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
234	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
241	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
242	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
248	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
259	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
264	N/A	N/C	ONE	THREE	*
272	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
274	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
277	N/A	N/C	TWO	THREE	*
283	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
284	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
287	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
292	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
293	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
294	NO	N/C	THREE	THREE	
295	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
296	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
299	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
302	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
303	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
306	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
307	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	

AC	Level One with HRA	Current Protocol Status	2022 Protection Level	2023 Protection Level	Level Change
308	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
309	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
312	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
319	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
331	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
332	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
340	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
341	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
343	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
344	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
347	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
348	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
350	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
351	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
353	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
354	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
355	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
357	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
358	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
360	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
362	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
370	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
371	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
374	N/A	N/C	ONE	THREE	*
376	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
378	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
379	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
380	N/A	N/C	ONE	THREE	*
382	N/A	N/C	ONE	THREE	*
383	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	*
384	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
388	N/A	N/C	THREE	TWO	*
389	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
390	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
391	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
395	N/A	N/C	TWO	THREE	*

AC	Level One with HRA	Current Protocol Status	2022 Protection Level	2023 Protection Level	Level Change
400	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
518	N/A	N/C	THREE	THREE	
537	N/A	N/C	THREE	ONE	
540	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
542	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	
574	YES	N/C	ONE	ONE	

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Monitoring surveys were accomplished using 390 calling stations to cover all potential spotted owl habitat within the 2023 sample quadrats. In comparison, during the 2022 season we used 387 calling stations to cover the habitat within the sample quadrats on HCP covered lands. Overall, a total of 877 calling stations were used to conduct nighttime surveys of the quadrats, activity centers and THPs in 2023.

Surveys in 2023 resulted in the equivalent of 3,682 nighttime survey visits, in comparison to 3,620 survey visits in 2022.

### **BARRED OWLS**

HRC has continued tracking detections of barred owls (*Strix varia*) since the species began responding to spotted owl calls on surveys starting in 1991. Mapping of the detections and nest sites illustrates: 1) greater activity to date in the northern areas of the ownership, 2) greater numbers of detections along riparian corridors, and 3) an indication of barred owl preference for the old growth MMCAs and Reserves (Map 2).

Evidence from Washington, Oregon, and other regions of California has indicated that barred owls have had a significant impact on occupancy and reproduction of spotted owls despite habitat retention efforts (Anthony et al. 2004, Courtney et al. 2004, USFWS 2008, Gutiérrez et al. 2007, USFWS 2011b, Dugger et al. 2016, Franklin, et al. 2021). The Service recognized that barred owls appear to be a greater threat to the recovery of spotted owls than was envisioned at the time of the spotted owl listing in 1990, and recommended immediate and coordinated action (USFWS 2008, USFWS 2011b). On

HRC lands indications are that barred owls have impacted the management goals of the HCP for spotted owls.

Results of a pilot barred owl removal study on Green Diamond Resource Company lands in northern California indicated that the lethal removal of barred owls allowed recovery of northern spotted owl populations in the treated (barred owl removal) portions of the study area (Diller et al. 2016).

The USGS began a barred owl removal study in 2015 on three study areas in Oregon and Washington and by the end of the study period in 2019 had removed a total of 2,066 barred owls from the three study areas (Wiens et al. 2020).

According to Wiens et al. (2019) they observed an overall 63 percent decline in numbers of territorial pairs of spotted owls in control areas with a concurrent 19 percent increase in treatment (removal) areas. The pattern of change was most prominent in the Oregon Coast Range, where they observed an approximate 50 percent increase in the number of pairs of Spotted Owls in the treatment area with a 91 percent decrease in control areas.

According to Wiens et al. (2018) the initial experimental removals of barred owls had little measurable effect on occupancy and reproduction of spotted owls after the first 1-2 years of study implementation. Preliminary results of site-usage by pairs of barred owls indicated that removals were effective in reducing the study population by 19–43 percent with 2–3 years of removal effort (Wiens et al. 2019).

By the end of the 2019 season, post-removal changes were the most pronounced in the Oregon Coast Range study area, where the number of spotted owl pairs detected in treated (removal) areas had doubled during the study period yet decreased by 91% in the control areas (Wiens et al. 2020). The declining trend of spotted owls has continued in the control areas, with an overall 83% decline in territorial pairs over the 4-year period, whereas there was a 12% increase in the number of pairs detected in treated sites. While the authors cautioned that data are preliminary and pending final analyses, the initial study results indicate that the number of resident spotted owls have been maintained in



treated landscapes and have continued a declining trend in control areas (Wiens et al. 2020).

The 2021 NSO meta-analysis of 26 years of data from 11 study areas (Franklin, et. al., 2021) indicated that NSO populations declined by 2-9% annually among the study areas. Barred owls were the primary factor negatively affecting NSO life history traits and rates of population change. The authors concluded that NSO populations could face extirpation if the negative effects of barred owls are not ameliorated while maintaining spotted owl habitat.

According to Franklin, et. al. (2021), spotted owl populations have declined at Washington study areas by 75 to 80 percent from 1995-2017, Oregon study areas declined by 60 to 75 percent, and at California study areas by 50 to 60 percent. Population declines on HRC lands have somewhat mirrored these declines. Using estimates of the total NSO population (Table 3), population declines on HRC lands from 1999 to 2023 have declined by 43%.

Barred owl activity in our study area continues to indicate that there are established barred owl territories with reproductively active pairs, in addition to what appears to be a “floater” population; available to disperse into unoccupied territories. In 2023, there was the same number of barred owl detections as in 2022 (72) (Figure 1). Since we began tracking the barred owl invasion, there have been 78 Level 1 sites that appear to have been displaced or disrupted by the presence of barred owls (e.g., with the presence of barred owls detected within 0.5-mile), including those shown below:

**Table 1.5.** Summary of Level One sites that have been affected by barred owls.

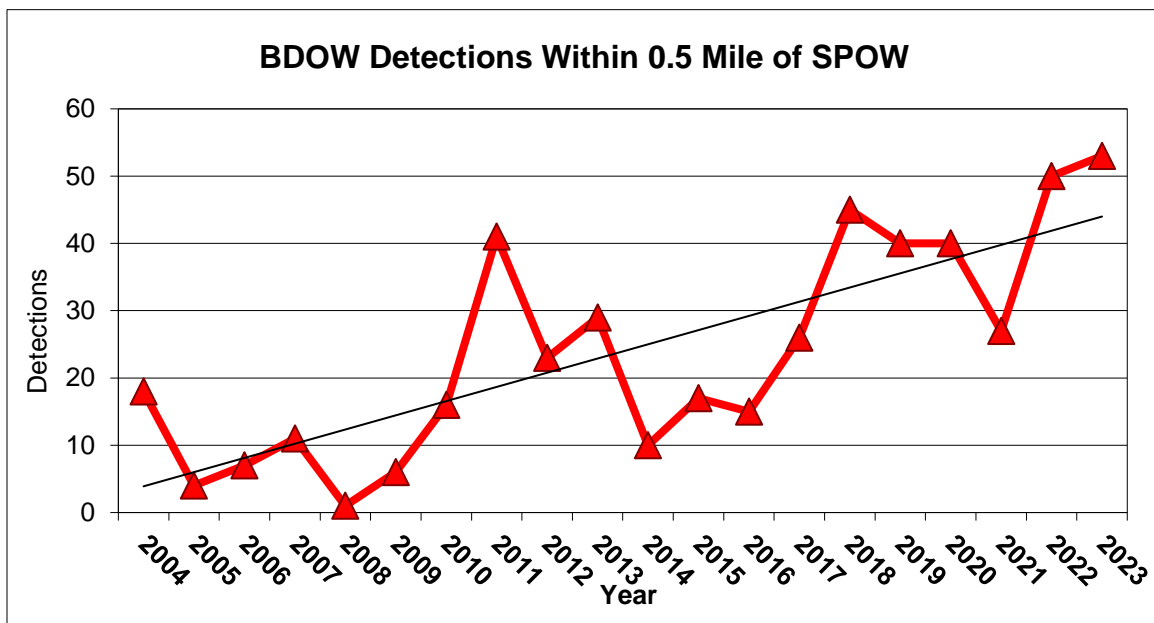
HRC Activity Center Number	LEVEL ONE WTH HRA	Level of Protection for 2022	Status	Level of Protection for 2023	Current protocol status	Historic Barred Owl Detections within 0.5 mile?
3	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	N/C	Yes
4	YES	ONE	PU	ONE	M	Yes
5	YES	ONE	PU	ONE	U	Yes
11	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
13	YES	ONE	M	ONE	NC	Yes
14	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
16	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
19	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
22	YES	ONE	M	ONE	NC	Yes
23	YES	ONE	M	ONE	M	Yes
26	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
27	YES	ONE	F	ONE	PU	Yes
28	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
30	YES	ONE	PU	ONE	PU	Yes
32	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
33	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
35	NO	ONE	PN1J	ONE	PU	Yes
37	NO	THREE	PN2J	ONE	M	Yes
39	YES	ONE	PU	ONE	PNN	Yes
41	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
50	YES	ONE	PN1J	ONE	PU	Yes
51	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	M	Yes
52	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
58	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
62	NO	ONE	NC	THREE	NC	Yes
65	YES	ONE	PN2J	ONE	PU	Yes
85	YES	ONE	F	ONE	F	Yes
88	YES	ONE	PU	ONE	PU	Yes
91	NO	ONE	PU	ONE	F	Yes
92	NO	ONE	PU	ONE	M	Yes
97	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	F	Yes
98	NO	ONE	PU	ONE	F	Yes
99	YES	ONE	U	ONE	F	Yes
123	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes

HRC Activity Center Number	LEVEL ONE WTH HRA	Level of Protection for 2022	Status	Level of Protection for 2023	Current protocol status	Historic Barred Owl Detections within 0.5 mile?
125	YES	ONE	PN2J	ONE	PN2J	Yes
130	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
133	NO	ONE	PN2J	ONE	F	Yes
137	NO	ONE	PN2J	ONE	PNF	Yes
147	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	M	Yes
154	YES	ONE	PU	ONE	NC	Yes
158	YES	ONE	PN2J	ONE	PNN	Yes
163	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
165	YES	ONE	PU	ONE	PU	Yes
170	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
181	YES	ONE	M	ONE	M	Yes
196	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
197	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
201	YES	ONE	M	ONE	M	Yes
209	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
217	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
218	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
234	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
236	NO	ONE	PU	ONE	PN2J	Yes
260	YES	ONE	M	ONE	U	Yes
272	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
293	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
294	NO	ONE	NC	THREE	NC	Yes
310	NO	ONE	M	ONE	M	Yes
319	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
320	YES	ONE	PU	ONE	PN2J	Yes
321	YES	ONE	U	ONE	F	Yes
329	YES	ONE	F	ONE	F	Yes
331	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
332	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
346	NO	ONE	PNN	ONE	PNN	Yes
347	NO	THREE	NC	THREE	NC	Yes
366	NO	ONE	PN1J	ONE	PN2J	Yes
368	NO	ONE	PU	TWO	U	Yes
369	NO	ONE	U	TWO	PN2J	Yes
377	NO	ONE	PN2J	ONE	PNN	Yes

HRC Activity Center Number	LEVEL ONE WTH HRA	Level of Protection for 2022	Status	Level of Protection for 2023	Current protocol status	Historic Barred Owl Detections within 0.5 mile?
380	NO	ONE	PN1J	THREE	NC	Yes
382	NO	ONE	PU	THREE	NC	Yes
540	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
542	YES	ONE	NC	ONE	NC	Yes
574	YES	ONE	PU	ONE	NC	Yes
575	NO	ONE	PU	ONE	PU	Yes

NC=no contact, M=single male, F=single female, P=pair, PU=pair unknown status, PN=pair nesting, PNN=pair non-nesting, PNF=pair nest failed, PN1J=pair nesting 1 juvenile, PN2J=pair nesting 2 juveniles.

The number of barred owl detections over time within 0.5 mile of spotted owl activity centers is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Barred owl detections within 0.5 mile of spotted owl activity sites.

In 2023 there were 40 detections of barred owls on night and daytime surveys at HCP spotted owl sites including:

- 9 (North Fork Elk River/Bible Camp)
- 18 (Upper North Fork Elk River)
- 19 (Upper Bell Creek)

- 20 (North Fork Elk River)
- 21 (North Fork Elk River)
- 22 (Upper Booths Run Creek)
- 27 (Rohner Creek)
- 28 (Strong's Creek)
- 44 (Cummings Creek)
- 46 (H-Line, Van Duzen Drainage)
- 47 (Upper Grizzly Creek)
- 58 (Howe Creek)
- 59 (Shively Road 3 ½)
- 90 (Lower Bear Creek)
- 108 (McCann)
- 119 (Grizzly Creek)
- 123 (Root Creek)
- 127 (Bohana-Upper Yager Creek)
- 154 (Van Duzen River)
- 167 (Across From Corbett Ranch, Van Duzen Drainage)
- 172 (Upper Grizzly Creek)
- 182 (Upper Carson Creek)
- 189 (Strong's Creek)
- 201 (Newman Creek)
- 203 (Bohana/Upper North Fork Yager)
- 209 (McGinnis Creek)
- 219 (McGinnis Creek)
- 221 (South Fork Elk)
- 224 (Rohner Creek)
- 234 (North Fork Elk River)
- 248 (Pog/North Fork Elk River)
- 260 (Gas Wells)
- 293 (Lower Elk River)
- 296 (Brown's Gulch, North Fork Elk River)

- 302 (Tom Gulch)
- 304 (Strong's Creek)
- 308 (Upper Larabee Creek)
- 320 (Bridge Creek)
- 340 (Upper Bridge Creek, Shively)
- 379 (Upper Harmonica Creek)
- 595 (Elkhead Springs)

In contrast, over the last several years there have been 21 activity sites that have been re-occupied by spotted owls after having been occupied by barred owls:

- 7 (Dunlap Gulch)
- 9 (North Fork Elk River)
- 11 (Doe Creek)
- 27 (Rohner Creek)
- 28 (Strong's Creek)
- 41 (Road 24 Yager Creek)
- 98 (Allen Creek)
- 99 (Chadd Creek)
- 126 (Lower Cloney Gulch)
- 153 (Upper Freshwater Creek)
- 166 (Hely Creek)
- 167 (Corbett Ranch)
- 260 (Gas Wells)
- 33 (Middle Cooper Mill Creek)
- 38 (Yager Creek)
- 287 (McCready Gulch/Freshwater)
- 320 (Bridge Creek)
- 163 (Yager Creek)
- 88 (Greenlaw Creek)
- 346 (Yager Creek)
- 293 (Clapp Gulch)

- 574 (Mt. Bemis-Grizzly Creek)

See Map 2 for current and historic barred owl detections and nest sites located on HRC property.

### **WEST NILE VIRUS (WNV)**

There is limited information on WNV to report for 2023. Based on preliminary data, there were no human disease cases reported in Humboldt County in 2023. However, WNV continues to have the potential to be a threat to the northern spotted owl range-wide, and specifically to the Klamath region population (Courtney et al. 2004).

WNV has been documented in other species in Humboldt County. Mosquitoes, the vector organism for WNV, are very prevalent in the area. WNV has the potential to disrupt HCP objectives regardless of the covered activities of the HCP; however, at the present time there are no avian diseases that appear to be significantly affecting spotted owl populations (USFWS 2008).

Blakesley *et al.* (2004) In USFWS (2010) offered two different scenarios for the possible outcomes of an infection by WNV of spotted owl populations:

- Spotted owls could tolerate severe, short-term population reductions caused by the virus because populations are widely distributed and number in the several thousands (see above also), and
- The virus will cause unsustainable mortality because of the frequency and/or magnitude of infection, thereby resulting in long-term population declines and extirpation from parts of the current range.

### **Sudden Oak Death (SOD)**

The infection of hardwood species, especially tanbark oak (*Notholithocarpus densiflorus* var. *densiflorus*), by the invasive plant pathogen *Phytophthora ramorum* (Pythiaceae) and subsequent deterioration of spotted owl habitat has been raised as a threat (Courtney et al. 2004, Courtney et al. 2008, USFWS 2008). The pathogen is not a fungus or a bacterium, but a member of a unique group of organisms called oomycetes (water molds).

Oomycetes share some characteristics of fungi but are biologically different and more closely related to yeasts and brown algae.

*Phytophthora ramorum* infects a host of hardwood species on the west coast and can cause significant mortality at the individual tree and stand level. Some hosts, such as California bay (*Umbellularia californica*) do not succumb to the disease but remain infected and continue to be a source for propagules unless treated.

The effects of this pathogen, known as Sudden Oak Death (SOD), could be especially harmful to spotted owl habitat in the Bear and Mattole watersheds on HRC lands where the hardwood component of habitat is most prevalent.

Yearly weather patterns are thought to significantly influence the reproduction and spread of this disease. SOD spores need thin films of water and overall wet conditions to survive and are thought to be transported in water droplets moved by wind. The often-dense fog, mild temperatures, and long wet season on the north coast create an environment that can be very susceptible to infection.

SOD stream survey (water samples collected and tested for *Phytophthora ramorum*) and vegetation monitoring (leaf and twig samples) results from 2008 to 2023 on HRC lands indicate evidence (positive stream samples and known infected trees) of the pathogen in the Canoe Creek, Decker Creek, Bull Creek, Thompson Creek, and Elk Creek planning watersheds as well as positive stream samples from the Lower Larabee planning watershed (the source of infection is likely off of HRC property to the east). All these sites are in the greater Upper Eel watershed unit.

Additional stream sample points on Yager Creek and Lawrence Creek, within the Wolverton Gulch, Cooper Mill Creek, Blanton Creek, and Corner Creek planning watersheds (all included in the Yager Lawrence watershed unit) were tested in 2018-2022 and results indicate that while Yager Creek is infected (source yet unknown) Lawrence Creek is not. Lawrence Creek was sampled again in 2023 and still appears to be free of the SOD pathogen.

In the northern portions of the HRC ownership stream samples recovered from Elk River, within the Lower Elk River planning watershed and greater Elk River watershed unit on



the western edge of HRC lands, were negative for the SOD pathogen. Samples recovered from Freshwater Creek below the confluence with Graham Gulch in the Cloney Gulch planning watershed within the greater Freshwater Creek watershed unit also tested negative for the SOD pathogen in 2019.

HRC continued stream sampling in 2021 and 2022 and collected samples from Bear Creek, Lawrence Creek, Yager Creek, and Bear River, as we have in past years, but also collected from both Conklin Creek and McGuinness Creek (both in the Mattole Delta planning watershed). All samples taken from HRC streams in 2021 and 2022 were negative for the presence of *Phytophthora ramorum* except Yager Creek which is known to be infected. During the 2023 sampling season HRC collected samples from Bear River, Bear Creek, and Lawrence Creek as in previous years but omitted sampling in Yager Creek as the drainage is known to be infected and a lack of accessible sampling sites upstream of the site used in the last round of sampling. An additional sample site was added on a Class II tributary to the Eel River near the McCann ferry crossing in 2023, this was the only site to come back with a positive hit for SOD during the 2023 sampling season. The McCann area is known to be infected but this positive sample extends the known infected area to the north side of the Eel River corridor, still within the Upper Eel watershed unit.

Statewide monitoring results for vegetation sampling efforts named the “SOD Blitz” conducted by the UC Berkeley Forest Pathology and Mycology Lab in 2023 showed a decrease in overall estimated infection rate (calculated from number of trees sampled compared to samples that test positive for SOD), down to 2.7% from 3.1% in 2022. This is the lowest calculated infection rate since the beginning of the study in 2008. In spite of high rainfall levels for the region in 2022 and 2023 (SOD thrives and spreads during rain events) infection rates increased in only the Sonoma, Carmel-Big sur, and West Peninsula regions while remaining relatively stable elsewhere.

### ***FOLLOW-UP VISITS***

Timely follow-up visits were conducted to the locale of night contacts to determine the status and location of the owls contacted. All core spotted owl sites, and all activity sites within the sample quadrats (“quadrat sites”) were visited to determine occupancy,

reproductive status, and reproductive success (if applicable). Other sites were visited to determine occupancy prior to the September designation of Level 1 sites.

A total of 697 daytime status and follow-up visits were conducted in 2023, compared to 821 in 2022. Surveys and daytime status visits were conducted in order to collect data to determine the HCP management objectives (HCP §6.2.1) for the core sites, as discussed above in the Study Area and Methods section.

### **MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES 1 AND 4**

Management objectives 1 and 4 of the HCP require the maintenance of a minimum of 108 activity sites in the HCP area over the life of the permit, and at least 108 total activity sites in the twenty-fifth year of the permit (2023). As noted above, the HCP management objectives apply to the 108 core sites, consisting of 80 Level 1 sites, and 28 Level 2 sites. Therefore, with the 108 core activity sites, management objectives 1 and 4 have been met for 2023 (Table 2).

**Table 2.** HCP northern spotted owl sites and occupancy status for 2023.

<b>Parameter Description</b>	<b>All Sites</b>	<b>Core Sites</b>	<b>Quadrat Sites</b>
A) HCP Occupied Sites	108	108	19
B) Occupied by Pairs	47	47	6
C) Occupied by Male	37	37	6
D) Occupied by Female	13	13	4
E) Occupied by Bird of unknown sex	12	11	3
F) Unoccupied (sites retained)	144	44	39
G) Unoccupied (sites removed)	0	0	0
H) Total HCP Property Sites	253	152	58
Occupancy rate by pairs* (HCP §6.2.1.2 target = 80%)	N/A	44%	32%

\*Occupancy rate by pairs is determined by taking the number of sites occupied by pairs (B) and dividing it by the number of occupied sites: (A).

Core Sites include all Level 1 and Level 2 Sites.

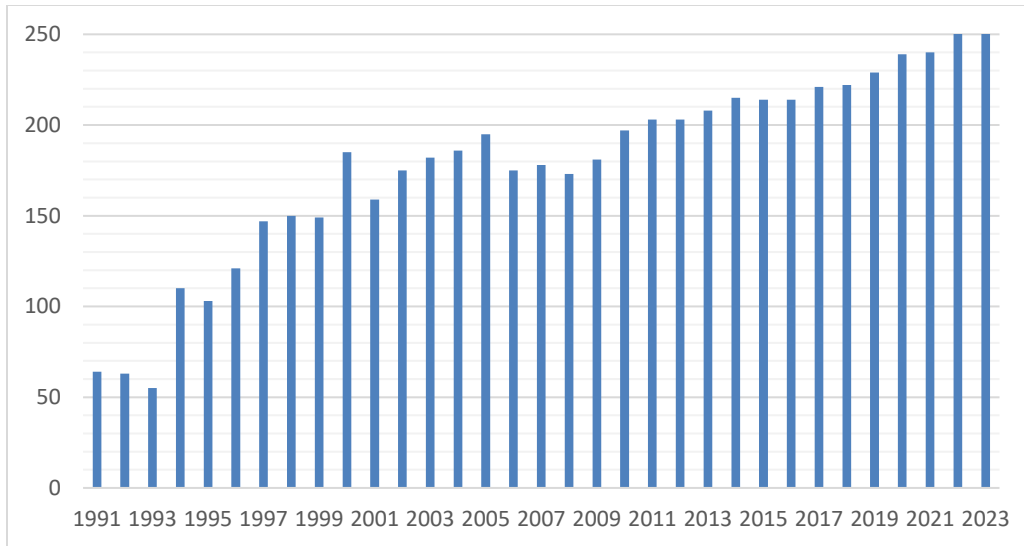
2023 again proved to be a difficult year to locate spotted owls during our typical monitoring and follow up site visits. By the end of the breeding season, we had 102 sites with daytime spotted owl observations (i.e., confirmed occupied sites) and an additional

six known sites that had nighttime audio detections, but no daytime observations of NSO. Since 2018, we have included sites with nighttime only detections to be considered occupied and included in the core sites. In October, Green Diamond Resource Company biologists reported that site 390 in Fiedler Creek was occupied by NSO and had been located on HRC property. Thus, five audio-based activity centers are included as core sites for 2023.

Although the presence of barred owls continues to make it difficult to contact and find northern spotted owls on HRC lands, spotted owl habitat retention under the HCP is currently greater than required. For example, HRC is currently providing habitat and disturbance buffers for 124 Level One activity centers rather than the required 80. There are 44 Level One ACs with habitat retention areas that are currently unoccupied. Consequently, there are 44 replacement Level One sites. In addition, in 2023, 35 activity centers met the criteria for removal from the active GIS layer according to the Decision Tree for Removal of Activity Centers (Attachment A) but have been retained (Appendix F).

The total number of HCP activity sites has shown an increasing trend over the HCP years (Range 149-253, mean 199) (Figure 2). It should be noted that not all Level 3 sites are surveyed for occupancy or non-occupancy every year, depending on which quadrats are being surveyed, although we effort to visit each site at least once each season.

In 2023 there were two re-occupied sites, but no new sites located on HRC property. It is possible that the increasing trend in spotted owl activity centers from 2008 – 2023 has been due to the movement of spotted owls as a result of increasing barred owl numbers, as well as the resulting barred owl influence on spotted owl activity centers.



**Figure 2.** Total NSO Activity Sites by HCP Year.

## **MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVE 2**

Management objective 2 calls for maintenance of spotted owl pairs on an average of 80% of the core sites in the HCP area. During HCP development, 80% was selected as a target by taking the average number of occupied sites that contained pairs during the period of 1991 to 1998. As per HCP §6.2.3 # 6, the values pertaining to management objectives 2 and 3 are to be averaged over rolling five-year periods (see below). Site occupancy surveys verified pairs at 47 of the core 108 sites during the 2023 season (Table 2), giving an occupancy rate by pairs of 44% (0.435). The five-year rolling average for the pair occupancy rate is 52% (Table 3).

To address the agreed-upon reporting components of the quadrat sampling approach, we also calculated the pair occupancy rate for all sites monitored in the quadrats, for comparison to results of the core sites. The pair occupancy rate for the 19 (occupied) activity sites within quadrats was 32%. For the quadrat sites, the five-year rolling average for the pair occupancy rate is 51%, similar to that of the core sites (Tables 2 and 4).

## **MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVE 3**

Management objective 3 requires the maintenance of a five-year rolling average reproductive rate of at least 0.61 fledged young per pair for the core sites (for those pairs

monitored to determine reproductive output). For establishment of a target reproductive rate during HCP development, 0.61 was selected as a target by taking the average number of young fledged per pair during the period of 1994 to 1998. However, only pairs that were determined to be nesting, or confirmed by protocol visits to be non-nesting, were used in the calculation. Spotted owl pairs with “status unknown” are now also used in the equation.

During the 2023 breeding season, 47 pairs (of the 108 core sites) were monitored for nesting activity and reproductive output. Nesting activity was verified for 12 of the 47 pairs. A total of 21 young fledged, resulting in a reproductive rate of 0.45 for the year. This results in a five-year rolling average reproductive rate for the twenty-fifth year of the HCP to 0.47 (Table 3), which does not meet the target for management objective 3.

Since 2013 or 2014 the rolling average reproductive rate seems to have settled in at a lower average that is perhaps reflective of the current spotted owl – barred owl dynamic.

**Table 3. Northern Spotted Owl Yearly Summary 2023.**

Activity Center Status Definitions and Management Objectives	BirdCount	Activity Center Status	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Single Unk Sex	1	U	4	8	8	1	1	3	3	2	7	3	6	1	4	4	4	4	1	7	4	7	13	9	2	8	11
Single Male	1	M	29	31	14	4	11	6	9	7	11	9	10	7	9	9	6	7	9	16	12	17	31	30	32	30	37
Single Female	1	F	6	3	4	8	11	5	5	9	12	10	5	7	6	13	11	6	7	10	9	8	8	9	8	11	13
Pair Status Unknown	2	PU	66	43	39	38	42	38	38	45	47	21	30	44	51	49	52	50	42	26	36	41	25	45	24	37	29
Non-nesting Pairs	2	PNN	11	14	12	18	20	13	7	7	14	6	3	5	8	6	17	8	10	24	21	4	8	3	3	2	3
Nesting Pair (failed)	2	PNF	0	5	8	2	9	5	5	3	2	9	2	1	9	6	3	7	7	6	6	7	7	2	7	0	3
Nesting Pair (PN)	2	PN	2	0	1	5	1	0	1	3	0	6	3	6	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nesting Pair (PN1J)	3	PN1J	10	10	22	16	7	16	21	16	6	5	13	21	7	9	4	7	15	9	9	12	8	5	9	9	3
Nesting Pair (PN2J)	4	PN2J	21	46	47	22	6	22	19	16	9	38	36	16	14	11	10	19	17	10	8	12	8	6	13	11	9
Nesting Pair (PN3J)	5	PN3J	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Total Nesting Pairs		total nesting pairs	33	56	71	43	14	38	41	35	15	50	52	43	21	21	15	33	39	25	23	31	23	14	29	20	12
2003 only 108 "core sites" are monitored for		Total # Sites	149	160	156	114	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108	108
Total Owls		Total # Owls	311	380	405	275	212	262	258	246	210	278	280	254	232	221	219	244	248	212	210	220	188	192	189	198	176
Pairs		Total # Pairs	110	118	130	101	85	94	91	90	78	86	87	93	89	82	87	91	91	75	80	76	56	62	56	59	47
Juveniles		Total # Fledglings	52	102	119	60	19	60	59	48	24	84	85	53	35	31	24	45	49	29	25	36	24	20	35	31	21
Pair Occupancy Rate		Pair Occupancy Rate	73.8%	73.8%	83.3%	88.6%	78.7%	87.0%	84.3%	83.3%	72.2%	79.6%	80.6%	86.1%	82.4%	75.9%	80.6%	84.3%	84.3%	69.4%	74.1%	70.4%	51.9%	57.4%	51.9%	54.6%	43.5%
Reproductive Rate		Reproductive Rate	0.61	0.86	0.92	0.59	0.22	0.64	0.65	0.53	0.31	0.98	0.98	0.57	0.39	0.38	0.28	0.49	0.54	0.39	0.31	0.47	0.43	0.32	0.63	0.53	0.45
Rolling Average Pair Occupancy Rate (5 Yr)		Rolling Average Occupancy Rate (5 Yr)	73.8%	73.8%	83.3%	88.6%	79.6%	82.3%	84.4%	84.4%	81.1%	81.3%	80.0%	80.4%	80.2%	80.9%	81.1%	81.9%	81.5%	78.9%	78.5%	76.5%	70.0%	64.6%	61.1%	57.2%	51.9%
Rolling Average Reproductive Rate (5 Yr)		Rolling Average Reproductive Rate (5 Yr)	0.61	0.86	0.92	0.59	0.64	0.65	0.60	0.53	0.47	0.62	0.69	0.67	0.64	0.66	0.52	0.42	0.42	0.41	0.40	0.44	0.43	0.38	0.43	0.48	0.47

\*since 2003 only 108 core sites have been monitored for reproductive and pair rates.

**Table 4.** Northern Spotted Owl Yearly Quadrat Summary 2023.

Owl Status	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Single Unk Sex	2	3	0	0	2	2	6	0	2	1	3	0	2	2	5	3	2	6	1	4	3
Single Male	4	4	3	5	4	3	5	9	5	3	3	5	7	1	4	3	7	6	7	9	6
Single Female	3	1	0	3	1	3	1	2	4	7	7	3	4	3	2	5	1	1	2	1	4
Pair Status Unknown	13	13	7	15	11	3	9	4	22	9	18	13	9	12	7	11	12	8	7	8	5
Non-nesting Pairs	6	3	0	1	2	3	1	0	3	1	3	3	1	4	0	2	3	0	1	0	0
Nesting Pair (failed)	2	2	1	0	0	2	1	0	1	1	1	4	0	3	1	3	3	1	1	0	0
Nesting Pairs	7	12	9	4	2	17	19	9	3	5	0	11	6	5	5	5	6	5	6	4	1
Total Number of Activity Sites	37	38	20	28	22	33	42	24	40	27	35	39	29	30	24	32	34	27	25	26	19
Total Number of Owls	74	87	49	51	40	89	106	47	75	52	57	89	54	55	41	50	66	51	46	44	27
Total Number of Pairs	28	30	17	20	15	25	30	13	29	16	22	31	16	21	12	18	24	14	14	12	6
Total Number of Juveniles	9	19	12	3	3	31	34	10	6	9	0	19	9	7	6	3	8	10	8	6	2
Pair Occupancy Rate	75.7%	78.9%	85.0%	71.4%	68.2%	75.8%	71.4%	54.2%	72.5%	59.3%	62.9%	79.5%	55.2%	70.0%	50.0%	56.3%	70.6%	51.9%	56.0%	46.2%	31.6%
Reproductive Rate	0.32	0.63	0.71	0.15	0.20	1.24	1.13	0.77	0.21	0.56	0.00	0.61	0.56	0.33	0.50	0.17	0.33	0.71	0.57	0.50	0.33
Rolling Pair Occupancy Rate (5 YR)	77.0%	78.1%	78.9%	77.7%	75.8%	75.9%	74.4%	68.2%	68.4%	66.6%	64.0%	65.7%	65.9%	65.4%	63.5%	62.2%	60.4%	59.7%	56.9%	56.2%	51.2%
Rolling Pair Reproductive Rate (5YR)	0.73	0.72	0.71	0.55	0.40	0.59	0.69	0.70	0.71	0.78	0.53	0.43	0.39	0.41	0.40	0.44	0.38	0.41	0.46	0.46	0.49

In 2004 the Service clarified that the rolling averages, or rolling means, for pair occupancy and reproductive rates should be calculated by calculating a mean for each individual year, then calculating a mean of means, where  $n = 5$  (Long 2004). This method is used for Tables 3 and 4.

For the quadrat sites, including all the Level 1-3 sites in the quadrat monitoring units, and using the number of pairs monitored for reproduction ( $n = 6$ ), the 2023 reproductive rate was 0.33 (Table 4). The five-year rolling average for reproductive rate among quadrat sites is 0.49 (Table 4). The five-year rolling average for reproductive rate among quadrat sites and core sites is similar this year, possibly due to the greater barred owl influence across the property over the past ten years.

The NSOSRP recommended monitoring both the core sites and quadrat sites for occupancy and reproduction and comparing the results to other study sites within the region. Because the HRC core sites and quadrat sites are managed in ways that are specific to the HCP, a comparison of trends in occupancy and reproduction with other study sites that are managed under different strategies (e.g., intensive timber harvest, moderate harvest, little to no harvest) can provide insight as to how the HCP is working and possibly what other factors may be affecting the spotted owl population (e.g., barred owls, climate). The available information indicates that trends for both the core and quadrat sites continue to track the results of other study areas over time (i.e., Figure 4).

Per HCP § 6.2.3, #3, management objectives may be modified if new information becomes available following review of NSOSRP recommendations and approval by the USFWS and CDFW.

### **ACTIVITY SITE LEVELS OF PROTECTION**

HCP §6.2.2 # 4, Conservation Measures, requires that owl activity sites on the covered lands be assigned to one of three protection levels. Accordingly, in September of 2023, 80 activity sites were designated as Level 1 sites. HRC requested an extension of the 1 June requirement for Level 1 selection due to the continuing difficulty of surveying all the available sites by that date. The difficulty has increased in recent years due to the presence of barred owls in the study area.



USFWS and CDFW again granted HRC's request to extend the selection to 31 August to allow more time to visit the owl sites and provide greater flexibility in selection.

Selection of Level 1 sites was guided by the parameters described in HCP §6.2.2.4: 1) having the requisite habitat levels within a 0.7- and 1.3-mile radius of the activity center; and 2) having supported spotted owls in the previous year (2022), and also in the year selected (2023). There were three activity centers (site 142 in Monument Creek, site 276 in Jordan Creek, and site 359 in McCann) that were not active in 2022 but were elevated to Level One protection in 2023.

In addition, as part of the minor modifications approved in 2002, further language regarding Level 1 sites was added to management objective 2:

*Maintain spotted owl pairs on an average of 80 percent (over a five-year period) of the minimum of 108 activity sites on the ownership (as shown in Table 7, for 2002 this minimum number shall be 115 activity sites, then 108 for 2003 and all subsequent years). At least 80 of these sites shall be Level One sites, and the balance shall be Level Two sites. PALCO intends to maintain these selected Level One and Level Two sites as the core sites for a period of from three to five years, or as long as possible, given other circumstances that may arise, and may preclude their maintenance as such. PALCO intends to select core sites that are historically stable, reproductively successful, and that have minimal disturbance, given that they occur in a managed landscape. (Emphasis added).*

In keeping with the requirements of HCP §6.2.2 # 4 and # 5, if less than 500 acres of suitable habitat exists within 0.7 miles, or less than 1,336 acres of suitable habitat exists within 1.3 miles, the acreage of habitat cannot be reduced.

HRC is currently maintaining 124 Level One sites (83 Level One sites with an HRA and 41 replacement Level One sites, per the HRA language).

See the appendices for details and information on habitat acreage relative to Level 1 sites, THP activity, and quadrats (Appendices A-C).

Level 2 protection measures were afforded to 28 sites in 2023 (HCP §6.2.2.5). Level 2 sites receive 1,000-foot buffers during the breeding season. After the breeding season, or if a non-nesting status is determined, harvest may occur around a Level 2 activity site, as long as an 18-

acre core area (the equivalent area of a 500-foot radius circle), with at least a 400-foot radius consisting of the best available habitat, is retained.

As with the Level 1 sites, as part of the HCP minor modifications approved in 2002, further language regarding Level 2 sites was added to HCP §6.2.2 # 5, bullet # 4:

*By 1 September of each year, PALCO shall designate the necessary number of Level Two sites, to make up the minimum number of activity sites as shown in Table 7.*

Accordingly, in late August we designated 28 Level 2 sites, which combined with the 80 Level One sites already designated made up the 108 core sites for 2023.

Level 3 protection was afforded the balance of the activity sites on the HCP covered lands in 2022 (HCP §6.2.2 # 6). Level 3 sites are those sites not needed to meet management objectives 1 or 4 (108 minimum activity sites). As with Level 2 sites, Level 3 sites receive 1,000-foot buffers during the breeding season.

Language was also added (in 2002) to HCP §6.2.2 # 6 regarding Level 3 sites:

*During the breeding season, for activity sites which have been determined to be occupied by a non-nesting pair or single NSO, 18 acres around the activity site shall be maintained as suitable nesting habitat, if present. The protected 18 acres may conform to natural landscape features, as designated by PALCO's wildlife biologist or a designee, and the buffer protecting the activity site must have at least a 400 foot radius. At PALCO's discretion harvesting may occur during the breeding season, in the area adjoining the 18-acre habitat retention area.*

Thus, if a non-nesting status is determined, harvest may occur around a Level 3 activity site, so long as an 18-acre core area (the equivalent area of a 500-foot radius circle), with at least a 400-foot radius is retained. After the breeding season, harvest of the Level 3 sites may occur. If the activity site is harvested, any known nest trees are to be retained.

### **Habitat Conditions**

The amount and type of spotted owl habitat as per HCP §6.2, Table 6 is reported annually (Table 5). Habitat information from the HRC Geographic Information System (GIS) is a “snapshot in time” of habitat conditions. For consistency and coordination with other forest inventory requirements the snapshot is currently taken on or around 1 January each year (Map 3). Thus, the

information contained in this section of the report represents habitat conditions from approximately 1 January 2023 to 1 January 2024.

As discussed in previous NSO annual reports, annual reports from 1999-2009 utilized forest stand information from 1999 and previous years to generate Wildlife Habitat Relationship (WHR) types and thus nesting, roosting, and foraging (NRF) types based on HCP Table 6. Beginning in 2010 HRC embarked on a re-inventory project of the entire 209,000 acres of HRC lands. For the 2010 through 2012 habitat reports we included the most current forest inventory information resulting from 2002-2006 cruise information, harvest updates for each year from 2000 forward, and cruise information available to date from the re-inventory work. This information was the most current and reliable “stand” information and best reflected conditions on the ground, although field evaluations were occasionally needed to verify stand types.

WHR habitat typing for 2023 reflects the changes in the preharvest status of the property from the outset of the year to the end of 2023 by incorporating the change in habitat due to confirmed harvested areas from 2023 THPs. Since the new inventory data are not yet available, no growth was added for 2023.

Historically, HRC has used the California Growth and Yield Modeling cooperative’s FORSEE software to process field inventory data. HRC has used output from FORSEE (modeled crown widths and WHR habitat species calls) together with the methodology described by PALCO’s 1999 HCP to assign WHR size classes and the associated nesting, roosting, and foraging classifications to each stand polygon.

HRC is currently finalizing a complete re-inventory of the ownership, scheduled for implementation in 2024, and will be moving to the Forest Biometric Research Institute’s Forest Projection System growth model (FPS) as that project is completed. The WHR classification of the re-inventory is near completion. This inventory will be implemented in 2024 after final review of the new inventory.

The current inventory information has been applied to both the property-wide analysis of habitat (Table 5, Figure 3) and the 0.7- and 1.3-mile habitat radii pertaining to the Level 1 activity sites (Appendix C). A change in habitat trends corresponding with change in ownership, silviculture,

and harvest level can be seen beginning around 2009. The steady, anticipated trend of reduction in nesting habitat, resulting in part due to the even-age silviculture preferred by the previous landowner, has leveled out. Similarly, the observed recent decline in the previously increasing number of acres of non-habitat is also consistent with the change to uneven-age management, with a concurrent increase in foraging habitat post-harvest.

Similar to previous annual reports, an analysis of patch sizes of suitable nesting habitat has been conducted on both the 18-acre and 80-acre polygon size and included with this report (Table 5). The inventory changes discussed above also resulted in a change in the number of habitat patches. The acres of habitat in the Grizzly Creek Complex and Owl Creek MMCA are shown separately due to the unique nature of these parcels. No new inventory information has been applied to these parcels, although it is reasonable to assume that young stands in these reserves are growing and potentially increasing in habitat value for spotted owls.

**Table 5.** Acres of Habitat and Nesting Habitat Patches.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Nesting (Acres)</b>	<b>Roosting (Acres)</b>	<b>Foraging (Acres)</b>	<b>Non Habitat (Acres)</b>	<b>18+ Acre Patches (Nesting)</b>	<b>80+ Acre Patches (Nesting)</b>
<b>1999</b>	87,416	35,343	40,780	45,142	199	64
<b>2000</b>	82,205	36,670	40,753	49,053	204	68
<b>2001</b>	76,799	37,416	40,608	53,858	214	62
<b>2002</b>	70,309	38,209	39,642	60,521	226	72
<b>2003</b>	65,984	38,289	39,538	64,870	231	79
<b>2004</b>	63,153	38,641	40,103	66,784	238	83
<b>2005</b>	60,927	39,557	40,307	70,442	241	93
<b>2006</b>	58,453	39,043	39,533	74,204	244	92
<b>2007</b>	56,386	37,390	39,010	78,431	250	87
<b>2008</b>	55,412	37,747	39,890	77,886	251	88
<b>2009</b>	54,402	59,036	28,094	68,130	348	101
<b>2010</b>	60,348	46,372	36,236	66,300	332	105
<b>2011</b>	55,758	56,063	43,589	53,869	366	118
<b>2012</b>	61,817	60,424	43,330	43,708	311	102
<b>2013</b>	57,171	52,842	68,177	31,073	421	128
<b>2014</b>	54,909	55,514	68,177	30,625	424	125
<b>2015</b>	53,106	58,642	68,302	29,227	426	123
<b>2016</b>	51,429	57,133	71,382	29,399	422	120
<b>2017</b>	50,491	60,427	71,980	26,445	431	127
<b>2018</b>	51,676	57,775	76,276	23,632	418	117
<b>2019</b>	49,141	60,982	73,989	25,244	423	118
<b>2020</b>	46,479	61,187	76,077	25,664	420	115
<b>2021</b>	45,955	60,999	76,900	25,724	426	113
<b>2022</b>	45,055	61,109	79,036	25,987	418	108
<b>2023</b>	44,751	59,044	80,938	26,470	417	107
<b>Grizzly_Owl</b>	1,921	208	325	388	5	4

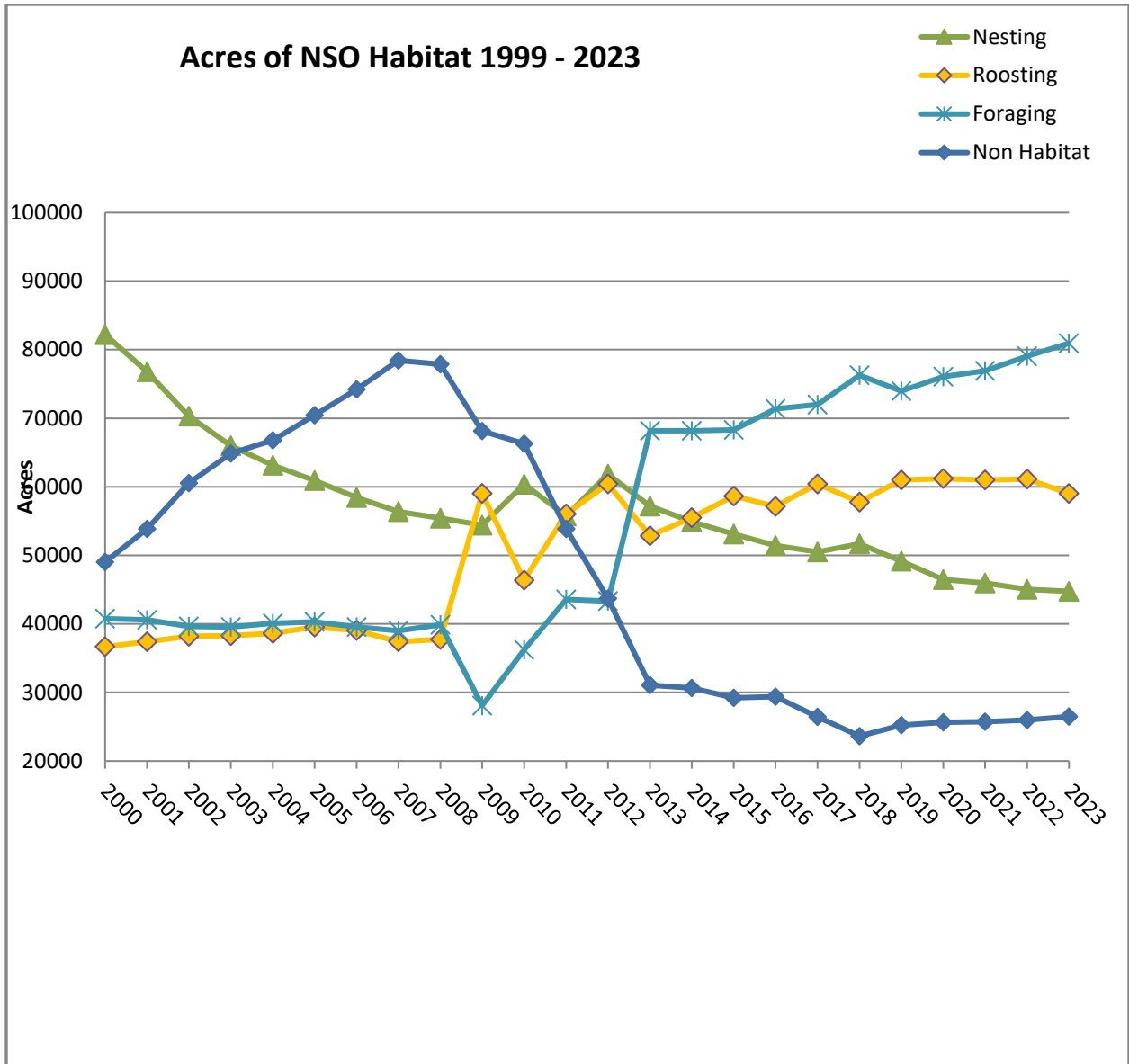


Figure 3. Northern spotted owl habitat types on HRC lands 1999-2023.

To put habitat growth and harvest on HRC lands in the context of regional habitat conditions within the range of the northern spotted owl, we have previously reviewed the Final and Revised Final Recovery Plans for the Northern Spotted Owl (USFWS 2008, 2011b). The USFWS (2008) reported on the loss of spotted owl habitat range-wide related to timber harvest and natural events. Specifically related to timber harvest, they cautioned readers that harvest estimates can only be used to infer rates of forest removal and may or may not translate directly to a rate of suitable habitat loss, since not all forest may equate to suitable spotted owl habitat.

Relative to the loss of suitable habitat due to **timber harvest**, USFWS (2008, 2011b) noted that there are only a few available reports on the topic, and summarized them as follows:

Cohen et al. (2002) cited in Bigley and Franklin (2004) reported “a steep decline in harvest rates between the late 1980’s and early 1990’s on State and Federal and private industrial forestlands.” Habitat trends reported by the Service (USFWS 2004) indicated an overall decline of about 2% in the amount of suitable habitat on Federal lands as a result of management activities from 1994 to 2003. This rate is lower than the 2.5% per decade estimate of habitat loss resulting from management activities that was predicted in the Northwest Forest Plan (USDA and USDI 1994). Cohen et al. (2002) reported that from the early 1970’s through the mid-1990’s the harvest rates on private industrial forest lands were consistently about twice the average harvest rate on public lands.

Raphael (2006) estimated that since 1994, losses of NSO habitat from non-federal timber harvest have exceeded losses from Federal land, with a range-wide loss of approximately 8.0% (12% in Washington, 10.7% in Oregon, and 2.2% in California). Raphael (2006) also conducted an analysis looking only at regeneration harvest. This analysis estimates that nearly 3,000 acres of higher suitability spotted owl habitat was harvested on Federal reserved lands, and about 26,000 acres on non-reserved lands, between 1994 and 2004. This harvest represents less than 1% of the approximately 10 million acres of high suitability habitat thought to exist on both Federal and non-federal land in 1994.

Davis and Dugger (2011) estimated the amount of spotted owl nesting and roosting habitat lost due to harvest from the start of the Northwest Forest Plan (1994/1996) to 2006/2007 on non-federal lands in California to be about 90,200 acres (5.8% of total). However, Davis and Lint

(2005) found that forest fragmentation in California *decreased* from the 1930's and 1940's to the current time, possibly due to fire suppression.

Regarding habitat loss from **natural events** the USFWS (2008) reported that the loss of spotted owl habitat from natural events during the 10-year period from 1994 to 2003 was 224,041 acres, or about a 3% decline in available habitat range-wide (USFWS 2004). The majority of the habitat loss was due to wildfire (75%) with insects and disease making up the remainder (25%). Approximately 7,500 acres (0.4%) in California were estimated to have been lost due to fire, insects and disease from (1994/1996) to 2006/2007 (Davis and Dugger 2011).

During the devastating fires of 2019-2020 in California, approximately 1.47 million acres burned in the range of the NSO (Stanish, pers. comm.). Approximately 378 NSO activity centers were within a fire perimeter. This number does not include those ACs that are outside of, but within the home range of a given fire perimeter. It was estimated that would add another 200 ACs, resulting in a total of approximately 10% of NSO ACs having been affected by fire.

### ***BANDING PROGRAM***

Banding of spotted owls as part of our overall program is a long-term research and management tool to help monitor the spotted owl population on the HRC ownership. The primary purposes of the banding and re-sighting project include defining stable activity sites (site fidelity and displacement); detection of changes in occupancy over time (turnover and replacement); documentation of movements of sites and nest areas; and assessment of habitat quality based on site occupancy and reproductive history.

We again request that the Service and Department consider this report, with associated Map 1, to satisfy the requirements of Federal Recovery Permit, Memoranda of Understanding, and Scientific Collecting Permit reports.

In 2023, there were 47 total band resights (Appendix H). Of the 108 core sites, 8 pairs were positively identified at occupied sites. Since 2003 a total of 459 spotted owls have been banded, consisting of 396 adults and 62 juveniles.



Data from HRC banded northern spotted owls with at least seven years of data (131 banded adults from 60 sites during the years 2000-2006) showed that spotted owl survival remained stable over that time period (Bigger et al. 2008). Continuing to collect and analyze banding and re-sight information is a key component of this program.

## **REGIONAL TRENDS**

Following the 2003, 2007, and 2020 survey seasons, PALCO, HRC, the NSOSRP, and the Agencies convened and discussed the HCP management objectives, potential reasons why they may not be met, and potential corrective measures to implement if necessary. In 2003 and 2007 the NSOSRP recommended that HCP results be compared to those of other study areas in the region. Figure 4 below illustrates the regional northern spotted owl reproductive rates for several study areas of Northern California (Early, Higley, pers. comm. 2023). As demonstrated in the figure, results for both the core and quadrat sites on HRC track the results of other study areas over the HCP period.

As with other studies in the region (Anthony, et al 2004, Franklin 1997, Franklin 2000) data indicates that reproductive results are strongly correlated to regional trends in climate (Franklin, et al. 2000, HRC, unpublished data). Glenn (2009) found that climate accounted for 78-84% of the temporal variation in population change in the Oregon coast range, and climate and barred owls together accounted for approximately 100% of the changes in spotted owl survival. Thus, there are good and bad reproductive years that appear to track precipitation early in the breeding season, and more recently, the barred owl influence on spotted owl reproduction.

Only one of the five cooperators reported higher than average reproductive results for 2023. Typically, lower than average rainfall events of late spring results in higher-than-average reproduction. In 2023 there was a significantly wet and cold spring which was likely to have negatively impacted spotted owl nesting activities, in addition to barred owl interference.

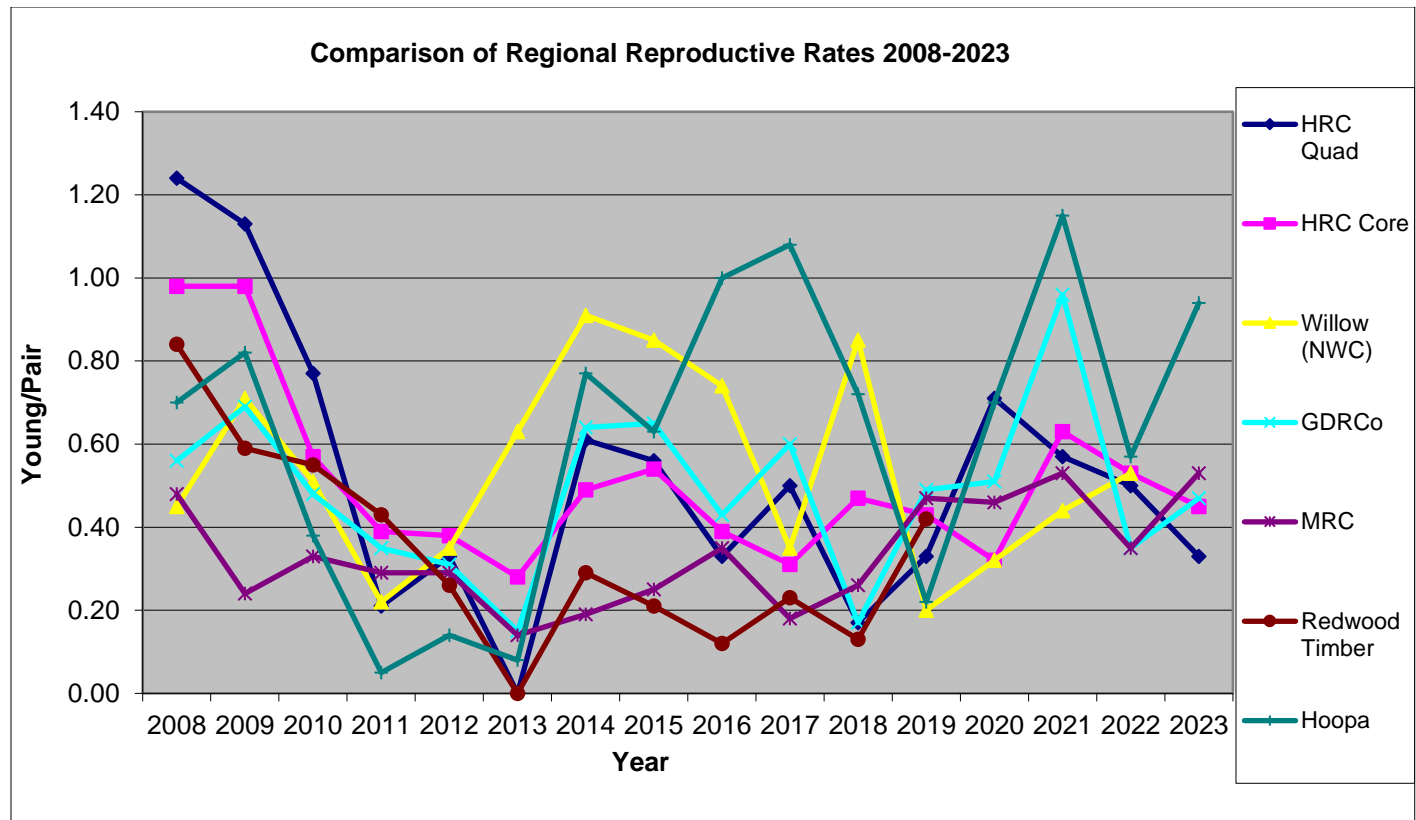


Figure 4. Comparison of Regional Reproductive Rates 2008-2023.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### SURVEYS

Current plans call for continued surveys in 2024 for THPs and for monitoring with the quadrat sampling strategy. In 2024, quadrats 3, 13, 18, and 20 are scheduled for monitoring (Howe/Atwell Creek, Long Ridge in the Mattole drainage, Lawrence Creek in the Yager drainage and Grizzly Creek in the Van Duzen drainage, respectively). These quadrats were initially surveyed in 2009, 2014 and again in 2019. Timely follow-up visits (i.e., within 72 hours, weather permitting) will be conducted to all nighttime contacts. Following the season, the data gathered will be used to evaluate the efficacy of the HCP management objectives and conservation measures for the core sites in addition to the quadrat sites.

## **BANDING**

In 2024 we intend to continue to work with the Service, Department, and adjacent study areas to make our banding efforts as efficient and effective as possible, keeping in mind the goals of the effort. As always, during any of our capture and banding efforts, we will continue to be cautious in our efforts, keeping the care and safety of the birds first in mind.

## **BARRED OWLS**

HRC continues to have significant concerns that the barred owl invasion will continue to cause declines in site occupancy and reproduction of our spotted owl population. In addition, HRC continues to be interested in the results of barred owl removal projects as recommended by the Service (USFWS 2008) and will continue to monitor the results of ongoing studies as they are available.

## **SCIENTIFIC PANEL/MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES**

The HCP Northern Spotted Owl Conservation Plan §6.2.2, Conservation Measures, Item 1 refers to the NSO Scientific Review Panel (NSOSRP) and discusses the establishment and roles of the NSOSRP. The NSOSRP generally met every year for the first 5-6 years of implementation and provided review of monitoring results and recommendations for future monitoring and analyses.

Not meeting the HCP management objectives for pair occupancy and/or reproductive rate triggers the adaptive management measures of HCP § 6.2.3, #6, and a discussion between HRC, USFWS, CDFW, and the Panel shall occur to review potential reasons why the objective is not being met, and potential corrective measures to implement.

As stated earlier, during the period of 2014 - 2023 the rolling five-year average reproductive rate for monitored pairs of northern spotted owls in our study area has not met the HCP objective of 0.61 fledglings per pair. This followed a period of five consecutive years (2008-2012) when the rolling average reproductive rate met the management objective. The current values may represent a level of spotted owl coexistence with barred owls, or a brief leveling off period that may be followed by another decline.

During the 25 years of HCP implementation (1999-2023) the management objective for the rolling average reproductive rate was not met during the 2006 and 2007 seasons (0.53 and 0.47 respectively). And, similar to the 2013-2023 period, followed seven consecutive years when the rolling average was greater than 0.61, or not significantly different from 0.61 (e.g., 0.59, 2002).

Following the 2007 season the HRC, USFWS, CDFW, and Panel convened via conference call to discuss the reproductive results. Consideration was given to whether there was a clear cause-and-effect relationship between management activities, or if results were within the range of annual variation.

At that time, the forestlands were still owned by the Pacific Lumber Company and managed using primarily even-age (clear cut) management at a rate of harvest of approximately 150 mmbf/year, including harvest of old growth trees. The barred owl invasion of north coastal California had not yet been fully realized as a potential reason for a reduced reproductive rate.

Although there were no clear reasons for a reduced reproductive rate, for discussion on the conference call a Habitat Retention Area (HRA) strategy was proposed as a potential corrective measure, with the objective of retaining a polygon of the best habitat surrounding the most stable and reproductive spotted owl nest sites, rather than using the 500' and 1,000' radii as the standard habitat retention model. The Service, Department, Panel and HRC agreed on the strategy, and it was implemented beginning in 2009 (CDFG and USFWS 2009).

In 2008 the Humboldt Redwood Company (HRC) was formed out of the Pacific Lumber Company bankruptcy proceedings and significant management changes followed, including in harvest techniques, rate of harvest, and retention of old growth components. Management of the Humboldt County forestlands was changed to reflect that of HRC's sister company, Mendocino Redwood Company (MRC), including the use of uneven-age (selection, group selection) harvest, a reduction in harvest level, and retention of all old growth trees meeting the company policy.

In 2008 and 2009 the annual reproductive rate was relatively high (0.98 both years) but has since declined from 2010-2023, and as the high rates have fallen out of the rolling average calculation and been replaced by lower rates, the rolling average has also declined to the point where it is below the management objective. So, although management on the forestlands has changed in a

manner that results in harvest of less spotted owl habitat (i.e., Figure 3), and retains more late successional habitat components on the landscape, the reproductive rate is in a current decline, nonetheless.

Similar to other study sites in the region, HRC has tracked the presence of barred owls in our study area. There has been an overall increase over time in barred owl detections within 0.5-mile of spotted owl activity sites (Figure 1). Studies previously referenced have indicated that barred owl presence within spotted owl territories can disrupt spotted owl occupancy and reproduction.

During the HCP's early years, the Panel recommended comparing the HRC HCP results to other study sites within the region. Because the HRC owl sites are managed in ways that are specific to the HCP, a comparison of trends in occupancy and reproduction with other study sites that are managed under different strategies (e.g., intensive timber harvest, moderate harvest, little to no harvest) can provide insight as to how the HCP is working and possibly what other factors may be affecting the spotted owl population (e.g., barred owls, climate). The available information indicates that trends for both the core and quadrat sites continue to track the results of other study areas over time (Figure 4).

As per HCP requirements, HRC and the Wildlife Agencies convened the NSOSRP in November of 2020 (Gutiérrez, et al. 2020). The NSOSRP concluded that the likely cause of lower population performance, especially over the past 5 years, is competition with invasive barred owls (*Strix varia*) but other factors could also have caused poor population performance by spotted owls. As a result, the NSOSRP recommended an experimental barred owl removal program consisting of removing as many barred owls as possible from the HCP area, and conducting retrospective studies assessing the effects of barred owls and other factors that might also cause such declines.

Most study areas in the region reported mixed breeding activity and reproductive rates in 2023, and there appears to be a declining trend unlike the “every other” year pattern, or weather-influenced effect on spotted owl reproduction that had been historically observed. It should also be noted that increases in spotted owl occupancy and reproduction on the Hoopa and Green Diamond study areas have been at least in part attributed to lethal barred owl removal from spotted owl territories. While 2023 results were down slightly from 2022 (0.45, 0.63

respectively), 2017 was the lowest rate for the last six years for HRC as the reproductive rate was 0.31, and along with the 2016 rate of 0.39, represents a similar trend of below average rates (for our study area) for the past six years along with 2013 rate of 0.28 that occurred in the last ten years.

In light of the fact that management of the HRC forestlands has had a reduced impact on habitat since the change in ownership in 2008, the evidence from other study areas within the range of the northern spotted owl that barred owls can have a significant impact on occupancy and reproduction of spotted owls, and the fact that HRC activity centers have been colonized by barred owls, it seems to be clear that barred owls are now negatively impacting spotted owl occupancy and reproduction on HRC lands and are the primary cause of failure to meet HCP management objectives.

We anticipate that these topics would be the primary focus of any future discussion of HCP management objectives and potential corrective measures, pursuant to HCP § 6.2.3, #6.

## REFERENCES

- Anthony, R.G., Eric D. Forsman, Alan B. Franklin, David R. Anderson, Kenneth P. Burnham, Gary C. White, Carl J. Schwarz, Jim Nichols, Jim E. Hines, Gail S. Olson, Steven H. Ackers, Steve Andrews, Brian L. Biswell, Peter C. Carlson, Lowell V. Diller, Katie M. Dugger, Katherine E. Fehring, Tracy L. Fleming, Richard P. Gerhardt, Scott A. Gremel, R.J. Gutiérrez, Patti J. Happe, Dale R. Herter, J. Mark Higley, Rob. B. Horn, Larry L. Irwin, Peter J. Loschl, Janice A. Reid, and Stan G. Sovern. 2004. Status and Trends in Demography of Northern Spotted Owls, 1985-2003. Report for the Interagency Regional Monitoring Program. 179 pp.
- Bigger, D., K. Sullivan, and S. Chinnici. 2008. Modeling reproductive performance of northern spotted owls relative to climate and forest habitat in coastal California. Presentation at the Annual Meeting of The Wildlife Society, Miami, Florida.
- Bigley, R. and J. Franklin. 2004. Habitat trends. Chapter 6 in S. Courtney (editor), Scientific evaluation of the status of the northern spotted owl. Sustainable Ecosystems Institute, Portland, Oregon.
- Blakesley, J.A., W. LaHaye, J.M.M. Marzluff, B.R. Noon, and S. Courtney. 2004. Demography. Chapter 8 in S. Courtney, editor. Scientific evaluation of the status of the northern spotted owl. Sustainable Ecosystems Institute, Portland, Oregon.
- California Department of Fish and Game. 2009. Concurrence on Habitat Retention Area Strategy for Level One Northern Spotted Owl Activity Centers, Humboldt Redwood Company Habitat Conservation Plan Section 6.2.2.4 Bullet # 6. Letter from CDFG to Humboldt Redwood Company, March 3, 2009.
- California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW). 2020. #20-R1-CTP84-NSO. Email from Susan Sniado, Senior Environmental Scientist, to Sal Chinnici and Brad Mauney (HRC). Level 1 Selection Additional Information. 28 October, 2020.
- Carlson, P. 2022. Personal communication between Peter Carlson, Research Associate, Colorado State University, and Brad Mauney, Lead Wildlife Biologist at HRC.
- Cohen, W.B., T.A. Spies, R.J. Alig, D.R. Oetter, T.K. Maiersperger, and M. Fiorella. 2002. Characterizing 23 years (1972-1995) of stand replacement disturbance in western Oregon forests with Landsat Imagery. *Ecosystems* 5:122-137.
- Courtney, Steven P., Jennifer A. Blakesley, Richard E. Bigley, Martin L. Cody, Jack P. Dumbacher, Robert C. Fleischer, Alan B. Franklin, Jerry F. Franklin, Rocky J. Gutiérrez, John M. Marzluff, and Lisa Sztukowski. 2004. Scientific Evaluation of the Status of the Northern Spotted Owl. Report to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Support of the 5-Year Status Review Process.
- Courtney, S.P., A.B. Carey, M.L. Cody, K. Engel, K.E. Fehring, J.F. Franklin, M.R. Fuller, R.J. Gutiérrez, J.F. Lehmkuhl, M.A. Hemstrom, P.F. Hessburg, S.L. Stephens, L.A. Sztukowski, L. Young. 2008. Scientific Review of the Draft Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan and Reviewer Comments. Sustainable Ecosystems Institute. Portland, OR. 159 pp.
- Davis, R.J., and K.M. Dugger. 2011. Northwest forest plan-the first 15 years (1994-2008): status and trends of Northern Spotted Owl Populations and Habitat. General Technical Report PNW- GTR-850. Pacific Northwest Research Station, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Portland, Oregon.
- Davis, R., and J. Lint. 2005. Habitat status and trends. Pages 21–82 in J. Lint, technical coordinator. Northwest Forest Plan—the first 10 years (1994–2003): status and trends of northern spotted owl populations and habitat. General Technical Report PNW-GTR-648, Pacific Northwest Research Station, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Portland, Oregon.

- Diller, L.V., K.A. Hamm, D.A. Early, D.W. Lamphear, K.M. Duggar, C.B. Yackulic, C.J. Schwarz, P.C. Carlson, and T.L. McDonald. Demographic Response of Northern Spotted Owls to Barred Owl Removal. *Journal of Wildlife Management*; DOI: 10.1002/jwmg.1046.
- Dugger, K.M., E.D. Forsman, A.B. Franklin, R.J. Davis, G.C. White, C.J. Schwarz, K.P. Burnham, J.D. Nichols, J.E. Hines, C.B. Yackulic, P.F. Doherty, Jr., L. Bailey, D.A. Clark, S.H. Ackers, L.S. Andrews, B. Augustine, B.L. Biswell, J. Blakesley, P.C. Carlson, M.J. Clement, L.V. Diller, E. M. Glenn, A. Green, S.A. Gremel, D.R. Herter, J.M. Higley, J. Hobson, R.B. Horn, K.P. Huyvaert, C. McCafferty, T. McDonald, K. McDonnell, G.S. Olson, J.A. Reid, J. Rockweit, V. Ruiz, J. Saenz, and S.G. Sovern. 2016. The effects of habitat, climate, and Barred Owls on long-term demography of Northern Spotted Owls. *The Condor: Ornithological Applications* 118: 57-116.
- Early, D. 2022. Personal communication between Desiree Early, Senior Terrestrial Biologist at Green Diamond Resource Company and Brad Mauney, Lead Wildlife Biologist at HRC.
- Franklin, A. 1997. Factors Affecting Temporal and Spatial Variation in Northern Spotted Owl Populations in Northwest California. PhD. Dissertation, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado. 185 pp.
- Franklin, A.B., D.R. Anderson, R.J. Gutiérrez, and K.P. Burnham. 2000. Climate, habitat quality, and fitness in northern spotted owl populations in northwestern California. *Ecological Monographs* 70:539-590.
- Franklin, A.B., K.M. Dugger, D.B. Lesmeister, R.J. Davis, J.D. Wiens, G.C. White, J.D. Nichols, J.E. Hines, C.B. Yackulic, C.J. Schwarz, S.H. Ackers, L.S. Andrews, L.L. Bailey, R. Bown, J. Burgher, K.P. Burnham, P.C. Carlson, T. Chestnut, M.M. Connor, K.E. Dilione, and H. Wise. Range-wide declines of northern spotted owl populations in the Pacific Northwest: A meta-analysis. *Biological Conservation*, Volume 259, July 2021.
- Fullerton, S. 2019. Personal communication between Scott Fullerton, Wildlife Biologist for Lyme Timberland Management, and Brad Mauney, Lead Wildlife Biologist at HRC.
- Glenn, E.M. 2009. Local weather, regional climate, and population dynamics of northern spotted owls in Washington and Oregon. Dissertation, Oregon State University, Corvallis.
- Green Diamond Resource Company. 2014. HCP Annual Report. Available on the website greendiamond.com.
- Gutiérrez, R. J., M. Cody, S. Courtney, and A. B. Franklin. 2007. The invasion of barred owls and its potential effect on the spotted owl: a conservation conundrum. *Biological Invasions* 9:181-196.
- Gutiérrez, R.J., A.B. Franklin, M.Z. Peery, and J.D. Wiens. 2020. Recommendations for assessing reasons for declining pair occupancy and reproductive output by Spotted owls on Humboldt Redwood Company land: Report of the Northern Spotted Owl Scientific Review Panel. 9 December 2020. 10 pp.
- Higley, J.M. 2022. Personal communication between J. Mark Higley, Senior Biologist for Hoopa Tribal Forestry, and Brad Mauney, Lead Wildlife Biologist at HRC.
- Irwin, L., D. Rock, and S. Rock. 2015. Resource Partitioning in California Coast Redwood Forests: Hope for Spotted Owls? Final Report. National Council for Air and Stream Improvement. 48 pp.
- Long, M. 2004. Letter from Michael Long, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to J. Barrett, Scotia Pacific Lumber LLC. April, 21, 2004. Review of the 2003 Northern Spotted Owl Annual Report of The Pacific Lumber Company (AFWO File Number 1-14-TA-2004-2190). 2 pp.



- Raphael, M.G. 2006. Conservation of listed species: the northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet. Chapter 7 in R.W. Haynes, B.T. Borman, D.C. Lee, and J.R. Martin (technical editors), Northwest Forest Plan – the first 10 years (1994-2003): synthesis of monitoring, and research results. Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-GTR. USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, Portland, Oregon.
- SOD Blitz Report. 2022. U.C. Berkeley Forest Pathology and Mycology  
[https://nature.berkeley.edu/matteolab/?page\\_id=7100](https://nature.berkeley.edu/matteolab/?page_id=7100)
- The Pacific Lumber Company. 1999. Habitat Conservation Plan for the Properties of The Pacific Lumber Company, Scotia Pacific Holding Co., and Salmon Creek Corporation.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of the Interior. 1994. Record of decision for amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management planning documents within the range of the northern spotted owl; standards and guidelines for management of habitat for late-successional and old growth forest related species within the range of the northern spotted owl USDA Forest Service, Portland, Oregon, and USDI Bureau of Land Management, Portland, Oregon.
- U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service. 2004. Estimate Trends in Suitable Habitat for the Northern Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) on Federal Lands from 1994 to 2003. For Use By: Sustainable Ecosystems Institute for the Northern Spotted Owl 5-Year Review. U.S.D.I. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1992. Protocol for surveying proposed management activities that may impact northern spotted owls. March 7, 1991 (Revised March 17, 1992).
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service. 1999. Biological and Conference Opinions Regarding Issuance of an Incidental Take Permit to the Pacific Lumber Company, Scotia Pacific Company LLC, and Salmon Creek Corporation. 469 pp. and Appendices.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2008. Final Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl, *Strix occidentalis caurina*. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Portland, Oregon. xii + 142 pp.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2009. Response to Proposal for a Habitat Retention Areas Strategy for Level 1 Northern Spotted Owls. Letter from USFWS to Humboldt Redwood Company, February 25, 2009.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2010. Draft revised recovery plan for the northern spotted owl, *Strix occidentalis caurina*. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Portland, Oregon. xii + 163 pp.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011a. Revised Survey Protocol for the Northern Spotted Owl, (*Strix occidentalis caurina*). U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Portland, Oregon.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011b. Revised Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl, (*Strix occidentalis caurina*). U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Portland, Oregon. Xvi + 258 pp.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011. 2011 Revision of the Northern Spotted Owl Take Avoidance Analysis and Guidance for California Coast Forest District. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arcata, CA. 12 pp.
- Wiens, David J., Katie M. Dugger, Damon Lesmeister, Krista E. Dilione, David C. Simon, and Robin Bown. 2017. Status of Spotted Owls, Barred Owls, and Removal Experiments in Oregon and Washington. Abstract of presentation at The Western Section of the Wildlife Society Conference. Santa Rosa, CA.
- Wiens, J.D., Dugger, K.M., Lesmeister, D.B., Dilione, K.E., and Simon, D.C.. 2018. Effects of experimental removal of Barred Owls on population demography of Northern Spotted Owls in

- Washington and Oregon-2017 progress report: U.S. Geologic Survey Open-File Report 2018-1086, 23 p., <https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20181086>.
- Wiens, J.D., Dugger, K.M., Lesmeister, D.B., Dilione, K.E., and Simon, D.C. 2019. Effects of Barred Owl (*Strix varia*) removal on population demography of Northern Spotted Owls (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) in Washington and Oregon, 2015–18: U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2019-1074, 17 p., <https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20191074>.
- Wiens, J.D., Dugger, K.M., Lesmeister, D.B., Dilione, K.E., and Simon, D.C. 2020. Effects of Barred Owl (*Strix varia*) removal on population demography of Northern Spotted Owls (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) in Washington and Oregon, 2019 annual report: U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2020-1089, 19 p., <https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20201089>.