

Don't Give a Hoot!

Are We Loving Some Birds to Death?

Birders are generally conservation-minded people. They truly care about the animals they are interested in seeing and hearing. However, in their quest to observe as many species as possible some birders are using tools that can be harmful to the birds they are trying to find. In particular, the use of tapes/MP3s and callers to locate birds can result in unintended negative consequences to the species attracted through the use of these tools. In **some** cases, the modest use of playback calling is an acceptable way of locating a bird. At other times it is very risky and exposes a bird to harm by calling it out from a hiding place or causing other problematic changes in behavior. Biologists and birders alike have an ethical and biological responsibility to know when not to use playback to find birds.

A 2006 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey of wildlife-associated recreation activities estimated there were nearly 48 million birders 16 years of age and older in the U.S. With this many birders it becomes more important than ever to pursue this activity ethically and with bird conservation in mind. The United Kingdom's Birdwatcher's Code states it eloquently: *avoid disturbing birds and their habitats – the birds' interests should always come first.* The recent explosion in affordable technology has made it easier to overlook the birds' interests. Internet posting of sightings, publication of localized birding guides, and advances in digital music players and compact speaker technology enable birders to follow detailed directions to known locations of rare birds and draw them out. Some birders' relentless pursuit of the northern spotted owl is one such example of the harm that may come from the use of modern technology.

The northern spotted owl was listed under the Endangered Species Act as

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Threatened in 1990. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the spotted owl primarily due to threats stemming from the loss of suitable habitat through timber harvest, but other factors included additional habitat loss from wildfire and competition from other species, especially the barred owl. Despite its listing and the additional protections it has been

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afforded, the northern spotted owl continues to display a rangewide population decline. Now that the range of the barred owl completely overlaps that of the northern spotted owl, the degree of competition for food, habitat, and space has never been greater. Disturbances caused by human presence and noise can add to the stress caused by habitat removal and competition.

There is a growing consensus among owl biologists that barred owls are pushing spotted owls out of their territories and may also be causing a reduction in spotted owl vocalization. Birders who use playback to incite spotted owls to call may be inadvertently putting spotted owls at risk by causing them to vocalize when they would normally be trying to stay

“under the radar”. Human presence near nest sites also causes spotted owls to vocalize more frequently. Barred owls (as well as goshawks, red-tailed hawks, and great horned owls) have been observed attacking spotted owls on a number of occasions. Being near an active nest site or using playback to incite spotted owls to call is likely to increase the odds that spotted owls will be killed or driven from their territories. While the risk of an attack on a spotted owl may be low, it is not zero, and it is literally a matter of life and death.

Exposing a spotted owl to predatory attack is the most serious consequence posed by unethical birding, but other negative effects can occur:

- An owl that spends time looking for the perceived owl (playback) in its territory does not spend that time foraging for itself and for its young. The energetic cost of needlessly defending a territory may be a higher price than the owl or its chicks can pay.
- Playing calls within a territory may make an owl think the territory is already occupied, and the owl may needlessly move on to seek a vacant territory. Vacant territories are increasingly hard to find in a landscape overrun by barred owls.
- Unattended chicks in the nest are potential prey not only to the raptors listed above, but to corvids as well.

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All of these impacts added together (and repeated if multiple uninformed birders visit the same site during the year) may lead to nesting failure, site abandonment, or death of spotted owls. *A Birder's Guide to Washington*, published in 2003, included detailed directions to many known spotted owl sites. At least two of these nest sites near Cle Elum, WA have become vacant or only sporadically occupied by single owls since this book was published – possibly due to the dramatic increase in birder visits.

Calling for spotted owls without a permit is not only unethical, it is also **illegal**: it is a violation of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and can be considered “take” which can lead to a fine of up to \$25,000 and 6 months in jail. Causing a spotted owl to leave shelter and have it fixated on you while you observe and possibly spotlight it, *significantly disrupts its normal behavior*; a form of “take” through “harassment.”

All birders should be familiar with the American Birding Association's Code of Birding Ethics, which states up front: 1(b) *To avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger... Limit the use of recordings and other methods of attracting birds, and never use such methods in heavily birded areas or for attracting any species that is Threatened, Endangered, or of Special Concern, or is rare in your local area.* Part of the joy of birding should be the development

of your fieldcraft while giving fair chase to your quarry, not relying on a crutch like playback to lure birds into easy view. Birding should be as much about the methods used as it is about the numbers, and your county or life list is all the more impressive when acquired skillfully and ethically.

Locations of ESA listed species should never be posted on web sites such as eBird, Tweetsters, or similar e-bulletin boards. Principled birders have no way of knowing who will read their posts, and what methods the next person may use to attempt to locate the bird. The spotted owl is but one example of why using call playback is not an ethically or environmentally responsible means of attracting sensitive species for viewing. **As a birder, your need to tick another county or life bird is never more important than a bird's life.** No biologist wants to see a species go extinct on their watch. Please help contribute to the spotted owls' recovery rather than contributing to their demise by allowing them to find and defend territories and raise their young undisturbed.

American Birding Association (United States), Principles of Birding Ethics:

www.aba.org/about/ethics.html

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (United Kingdom), Birdwatcher's Code:

www.rspb.org.uk/advice/watchingbirds/code/index.aspx

Spotted Owl
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