

Old-growth Forest in Our Back Yard?

by Matt Mega, *Advocate for Wildlife Habitat*

The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness.
—John Muir

What exactly is old growth and where can we find it? There are many ways to define it. The most common characteristic is an undisturbed forest with trees 200 years old or older. Also included in most definitions are structural characteristics, such as fallen trees, broken tops, and mature and dying trees. The combination of age and structure distinguish old growth from a younger forest.

If you plan to visit some of the Washington's remaining old-growth forest, do it quickly. The current state of old-growth forest is not good. In Washington and Oregon, less than 13% of original old growth remains. Throughout much of the United States, the picture is equally bleak. Forest fragmentation, soil erosion, monoculture plantings, and wildlife species' declines are some of the top issues related to old-growth loss.

Remaining old growth can be found in many of our Western Washington national forests, includ-

ing Olympic, Wenatchee, and North Cascades. For those limited to the Seattle area, finding old growth is nearly impossible. Most people believe that the last remaining old growth in Seattle can be found in West Seattle at Schmitz Preserve Park. This park covers 53 acres and, according to the city's website, is the only park in Seattle to contain old growth. Descriptions of the park also allude to "huge stumps in the park (that) still show deep notches hacked high above the ground for the 'spring-boards' on which axe-men would stand." The combination of stumps and remaining trees will help any visitor make an immediate connection to the past, prompt an appreciation of the present, and suggest a commitment to take action for the future.

To get involved in saving Washington's old-growth forest, write to your elected officials, stay informed about the issues, and practice good environmental stewardship at home by reducing waste, re-using material, and recycling.



© 2004, Marilyn Sandell

In Pursuit: An Opportunity of a Lifetime and a Renewed Commitment

by Matt Mega, *Advocate for Wildlife Habitat*

We follow an old gravel road that winds through the tall fir canopy not so far from the Teanaway River. It's a man-made road, but not a logging road, for we are in "old-growth forest." Few sounds penetrate the gathering dusk, and the air is full of anticipation. We impatiently scan every part of the forest through our binoculars. Even after 12 hours of birding, our minds are focused and our senses are sharp. We seek a bird that epitomizes both the wonder of the Western Washington old-growth conifer forest, and, sadly, the decline of these forests. We are in pursuit of the Spotted Owl.

The gravel road turns slightly to the left. We pause, stare, hope, but see nothing. A few of us continue along the gravel road while others stay behind. Before I am out of sight, I look back and see palpable excitement that can mean only one thing. I quickly but quietly return. Four pairs of binoculars are focused on a small object, about a foot and a half high, with dark eyes the size of quarters and visible white spots. White spots,

not bars! We peer intently at the owl, picking up all his subtleties: the way his wings are not fully overlapping, the grip of his talons on the branch, the frequent 270-degree rotation of his head. After several breath-taking minutes, we decide to head back to reality and leave this endangered animal to his ongoing struggle. We are awe-struck by our encounter with this quiet bird and thankful for the experience we have had.

Driving away, we notice several recent cuts and new logging roads heading up into the hillside. We think back to the Spotted Owl just a few thousand feet away, and we all renew our commitment to speak for those who do not have a voice.

Seattle Audubon staff made a Birdathon trip to Eastern Washington on May 12, and the Northern Spotted Owl was one of the 80-plus species they saw that day.

Marbled Murrelet and Spotted Owl Under Review

by Alex Morgan, Conservation Coordinator

The Marbled Murrelet and the Northern Spotted Owl are perhaps the two species most commonly associated with old-growth forests. The Marbled Murrelet is an elusive seabird that nests mainly in old-growth forests along the Pacific coast. The Spotted Owl nests, roosts, and feeds primarily in old-growth and mature forests. These two species depend upon structurally complex forests for their survival. As a result of the logging of old-growth forests, both species continue to decline in Washington State. Both species are listed under the Federal Endangered Species Act as threatened.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) agreed to initiate a five-year status review of both species in connection with the settlement of two 2002 lawsuits brought by the timber industry. The timber groups filed the lawsuits to force USFWS to undertake a review of the species' status and to void designations of critical habitat. USFWS settled out of court with the timber interests rather than defending against the lawsuits. Seattle Audubon, represented by Earthjustice, intervened to protect the species in the interim, while the reviews are being conducted.

Both review panels have convened groups of independent scientists, including species experts, to review all available scientific materials. Other panelists will include experts in such fields as genetics, forest ecology, and population dynamics.

The status review report for the Marbled Murrelet was released to the public in early May. It finds that the murrelet population is still in decline and continues to need federal protection. The report predicts continued population declines in Washington, Oregon, and California, due to loss of nesting habitat from logging and urbanization. Population trend models cited in the report predict that Marbled Murrelets may disappear from all of their native Pacific Northwest range within 100 years.

However, rather than pushing for better protections for murrelets, USFWS delayed its status review



© USFWS

determination without explanation. In mid-May, the timber industry and USFWS went to the court and were granted a 120-day extension for the Service's status determination. Given that the independent scientific analysis is done, the only reason for such a lengthy delay is to try to change and undercut the science. Seattle Audubon and the other interveners have asked the district

court to compel the Service to issue its status determination immediately.

Preliminary results for the Northern Spotted Owl review are just as bleak. The final review determination will be made this summer or fall by USFWS. The number of Spotted Owls in Washington has dropped by an average of 7.5% every year since 1990. A new demographics study documents continued declines among owls in most of 14 study sites in Washington, Oregon, and Northern California. Biologists said the drops in Oregon and California are slow enough that the Spotted Owl might hold on there for decades, but it likely cannot survive many years of the sharp drops it has endured in Washington State.

The scientific Marbled Murrelet report concludes, "It is unrealistic to expect that the species will recover before there is significant improvement in the amount and distribution of suitable nesting habitat." It is evident that above all the survival of these species depends upon adequate habitat. The remaining old-growth forests in our region must be protected if we are to continue to see Spotted Owls and Marbled Murrelets here in Washington.

Contact Alex Morgan, alexm@seattleaudubon.org or 206-985-6581, if you want to get involved.

Fast Facts about Marbled Murrelets and Northern Spotted Owls

Marbled Murrelets

- The Marbled Murrelet was the last bird in North America to have its nesting site discovered. This was in 1974 by a tree-trimmer high on a Douglas fir in California.
- Murrelets come off the water only under cover of darkness, and fly up to 60 miles an hour.
- Females lay only one egg per year.
- During incubation, the female and male take turns sitting on the egg for 24-hour shifts.
- Murrelet pairs return to the same forest grove each year, sometimes nesting repeatedly in the same tree.
- Parents stay with their newly hatched chick just one to two days, then leave the chick entirely alone, returning only to feed it.

Northern Spotted Owls

- The Northern Spotted Owl is a sub-species genetically separate from California and Mexican Spotted Owls.
- Predators of Spotted Owls include Barred Owls, Great-horned Owls, and Northern Goshawks.
- The owls are completely dependent on certain structural characteristics of old forests, including many vertical layers of trees, which provide adequate protection from sun and heat, nesting sites in large tree cavities, roosting sites near the ground, and an open forest floor, which permits the owl to hunt its main prey, the flying squirrel.
- The female lays two to four eggs, which are incubated for 30 days. The chicks start moving out of the nest at five weeks and learn to fly at six weeks of age.
- The Spotted Owl's diet consists of small mammals such as flying squirrels, wood rats, mice, voles, and also some birds, reptiles, amphibians, and insects.

A Hike Among the Giants

by Lauren Braden, Master Birder, and Director of Communications for Washington Trails Association

I remember the first time I hiked in an old-growth forest. It was in Mount Rainier National Park, during my very first visit to Washington, and the sheer beauty, awe-inspiring diameter of Douglas firs, and richness of life in that forest were certainly a few of the reasons I moved to Seattle the following summer.

Old-growth hikes abound here, especially if you are willing to drive a bit to one of the state's national parks or wilderness areas, but there are plenty of backcountry day hikes quite close to Seattle as well. Here are two of my favorites.

Skookum Flats

This close-in trail is an easy drive past Enumclaw, and a relatively easy hike for the elevation-challenged. The treasures are big Douglas firs and western red cedars growing along the banks of the White River. Some trees are five or six feet in diameter, although this stand of old growth is relatively young (250-300 years old) by Northwest old-growth standards. Don't expect solitude at the peak of hiking season; the trail's gentle grade and easy access attract both hikers and mountain bikers. It's a 12-mile loop, or for a shorter hike, turn around at Skookum Falls, just two miles in. *To get there:* Take SR 410 east from Enumclaw toward Mount Rainier. At FR73 head right for 6.5 miles. The short road into the trailhead is on your right.



The Northern Goshawk frequents old-growth forests.

Denny Creek

One of the closest old-growth hikes is the Denny Creek trail. Nine miles roundtrip, this popular hike boasts excellent examples of ancient mountain hemlock and superb Pacific silver fir. Novice hikers and small children will find the walking easy and pleasant up to the Denny Creek crossing at one mile. Solitude-seekers with good knees should continue on, and up, to Melakwa Lake. *To get there:* Drive I-90 east to exit 47. Turn left, then right at the "T" in the road, and shortly thereafter turn left onto Denny Creek Road (FS #58). Drive three miles more and just before the campground turn left on the signed road and follow to its end and the trailhead parking lot.

For more old-growth hikes, search the "hiking guide" at WTA's website, www.wta.org. Also check out *Old-Growth Forest Hikes: Washington and Oregon Cascades* by John and Diane Cissel, published by Mountaineers Books.