

Barred Owls & Spotted Owls

**Interview with Dr. Bob Zybach by Lars Larson on the Lars Larson Radio Show,
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LL: Hey, I got to tell you something. One of the craziest stories in the last couple of weeks is the story of about how the United States Fish & Wildlife Service, if I understand the story right, is going to go out and *slaughter* more than 3,000 birds. And the reason they are going to slaughter those birds is that those birds are killing other birds, but the other birds they are killing are considered protected. I'm talking about the barred owl, which is the *killer* and the spotted owl, which is the *killee*. Actually for the last few decades, the spotted owl has been the . . . "everybody's" victim. It's the victim of encroaching housing, it's the victim of logging, it's now the victim of its fellow owls -- and to get a perspective on this, I thought I would bring on Dr. Bob Zybach, who writes about it extensively. Doctor, good to have you back on the program.

BZ: Thank you Lars. Thanks for having me.

LL: So tell me this. Is there any difference really, between a spotted owl and a barred owl? Let's just jump right into the thick of this, because in the piece that you wrote, you can remind us where to find it on the web, you kind of suggested that there may not be a heck of a lot of difference between a barred owl and a spotted owl.

BZ: Well there is more difference between a collie and a German shepherd, than between a spotted owl and a barred owl. A barred owl is the most common owl in North America. It's called a hoot owl. It's the only brown-eyed eastern owl. And you said they were killing the spotted owls, but I don't think that's true.

LL: Ok, let's get into that as well. That is the case that the Fish & Wildlife Service is making, is that the barred owls are killing the spotted owls, hence, we have to slaughter them.

BZ: Yup. It's a pretty bizarre case.

LL: Is that not true. Are they not killing them?

BZ: No. Actually they probably had barred owls -- that's probably been the problem since day one. They've been here since the 70s at least. They are breeding with the spotted owls and producing viable young.

LL: Do the young look like spotted owls or barred owls?

BZ: They call them “sparred owls,” almost said it earlier [laughs].

LL: *Sparred owls* [chuckles]?

BZ: They all look the same. In my article I think I put, I used the analogy, which isn't always politically correct, that there is way more difference in vocalization, physiology, coloration, preferred habitat, and diet -- between a pigmy and a Swede. Way more differences than there are between these two types of hoot owls.

LL: So what is the real agenda here then?

BZ: Well that's interesting, isn't it? I don't want to be a conspiracy theorist, but they say the problem with incompetence is on the surface it looks just like conspiracy.

LL: [Laughs]. That's a good way to put it.

BZ: I think those are our two options, really.

LL: So let's go back the genetic question. How is it then, and you, was there a point when science didn't even differentiate between the hoot owl and the spotted owl?

BZ: You know they probably did, but I don't think science really weighed in on it and it wasn't really necessarily a scientific question. It just started in the early 70s when Eric Forsman climbed a tree and found a spotted owl nest and took a souvenir and raised it at home for 30 years and made a career studying those animals.

LL: Was that even legal at the time [chuckles]?

BZ: He said it was a rescue operation, but when you look at the statistics for finding your very first nest ever and having to rescue a bird and never rescuing another one again for 30 years . . .

LL: Well this is one of the reasons I wanted . . .

BZ: And who is he rescuing it from? It's habitat or what?

LL: Well, from Mother Nature. And this is the part that has bothered me the most about this is that this appears to be mother nature taking its course, which the opponents of logging and the opponents of, you know, cutting old growth and everything else, they say they want nature to take its course, they would rather have trees burned down than to have human beings cut them down and replant them. So I guess I figured they'd follow the same path. If barred owls are killing spotted owls, if there is a difference, they would just say well that is Mother Nature taking its course. It's a superior owl and an inferior owl, but you are saying there isn't even necessarily truth, evidentiary back-up, that the barred owls are killing the spotted owls. What are they using as their evidence that this is happening?

BZ: I think there is one case and I really haven't looked at the literature lately, but there is one case, they started this program in 2007. It's been going on for six years and there is one instance of one person that reported seeing a barred owl eating a dead spotted owl. Now if that is an accurate observation; that is not the same as killing it. You know there are lots of animals that . . . eat road kill and stuff. I mean that . . .

LL: But they are . . .

BZ: . . . that could happen. We got cannibals.

LL: And they are carrion eaters, right? I mean just like a lot of birds are? They'll eat dead stuff.

BZ: I'm not sure about that. They are pretty much after mice and squirrels and stuff like that.

LL: Ok, alright. So if they don't have any real proof then you are suggesting that maybe just these two slightly different kinds of owls are breeding and then producing owls where you can't tell whether they are spotted or barred, so they are a little halfy-50?

BZ: Yep. And that's a hybrid and that's a normal part of the evolutionary process and its way less significant than say when people came from Europe and Africa and colonized North America and begin taking over the range of Native Americans. I mean the whole process of diseases and barbarities, you know, murders and breeding, especially, pretty much assimilates one population into another. The main difference, it looks like here, is we are looking at variations, like a red rose and a yellow rose are still both a rose or a dachshund and a German shepherd are still both dogs. Pigmies and Swedes are still people. These look like they are both still hoot owls.

LL: Alright, so, but the significance of all this, is that the existence of the spotted owl and you know, claims that they are being protected by the government has led to effectively a ban on most logging on Federal lands that even continues today, where just as recently as last week, it was either the BLM or the Forest Service said, "We have been ordered to do this much logging, we are not going to do it, because you know, we are concerned about whether or not, you know we are going to get sued. Whether or not it will be stopped in court. Whether or not we are doing it the right way. Or have we studied it enough?" So it's devastated the economies of Oregon and Washington for the benefit of a bird that appears not to be benefiting from it, because they are being killed by their fellow birds.

BZ: Well the population is declining. The other thing the judge ruled, one he said, they got to obey the law of 1937 and it's never been repealed. The O&C Act, and that shouldn't have taken 20 years of fighting in court to figure out and it will be appealed. The other thing they ruled was that the models they were using to simulate owl populations and locations were ridiculous, were deeply flawed. And couldn't be used anymore. So that turns into, back into a science question.

And the science question is: Is there a correlation between habitat and, especially as a wildlife biologist might define that habitat, and populations of select species? And all indications are no. Otherwise we would have 500,000 more people in Detroit.

LL: So how does this get resolved and are there any real scientists working on this to figure out whether or not we were wrong all along? Or the Forest Service was wrong all along and the Congress and the courts and everyone else to ban all this logging?

BZ: Well it's only a very few people that did it. The Gang of Four and then we have FEMAT; you probably remember all that stuff.

LL: Yup.

BZ: It's a really small group of people in a closed room, shredding their documents every day, deciding how foresters should actually manage the forests and the plan, there are many people, myself included who just said, you know this is ridiculous, it can't work, it's going against nature. And it's been 20 years now, it hasn't worked, we've got rotting trees everywhere, we got bankrupt counties or going bankrupt counties, we got thousands of families that have been devastated. Entire infrastructure has failed, so I can't see a point in even going one more step forward.

LL: You know it's funny, I get emails like this from Gary while we are talking about this, bottom line is the majority of Oregonians don't want our public lands clearcut. I don't know where he gets that, but he says whether it's an owl or something else, I was in Tillamook for the fourth and saw many loaded log trucks on Highway 6. There is a lot of logging going on. What he may not understand is that Tillamook is located in the middle of a state forest, which is under a different government, and that there are also private forestlands that are being logged right now, but that there is very little logging going on in federal forestlands. Does that match your information Doc.?

BZ: Well, yeah. The Federal lands are pretty well shut down and the forest industry or the industrial lands, they are owned by the big international corps, who got really hurt in this or the local mom and pop logging and sawmill families, reforestation families that were effectively put out of work that don't have millions of acres of their own land base.

LL: Hey Doc, do you mind sticking around taking a few phone calls from folks, because I imagine we are going to get a few people asking questions, but I just thought it was well worth making the point that scientifically if there is very little difference and if these two species cross breed then and if they can't prove that one kind of owl is killing the other kind of owl, then why would they go out and slaughter a bunch of owls and why would they continue to shut the forests down? Doctor Bob Zybach is with me. We'll get your phone calls and your emails right here at 866-HEY-LARS, that is 866-4395-5277. Emails got to talk@larlson.com.

Welcome back to the Lars Larson show. It's nine minutes before the hour. Well my producer and my board op, Doctor Zybach, did his best of find an owl song and I told him he should have played, *Who Are You?* But I'm glad to have you on board. Do you mind taking some calls from folks who called in about this?

BZ: Not at all.

LL: Ok, Dr. Bob Zybach is with me. The U.S. Federal Fish & Wildlife Service plans to go out and kill 3,600 barred owls in a four-county area in Oregon to try to save the spotted owls that the Fish & Wildlife Service says are being killed by the barred owl. Charles is on the line in Portland. Charles, what is your question or comment?

C: Hi Lars. Yeah, *Who Are You?* would have been a much better song, no doubt.

LL: No doubt [laughs].

C: I wanted to put out something here. I believe you've been corrected by your guest two or three times here, that the barred owls are not killing the spotted owl.

LL: Well I'll tell you what, before ...

C: [inaudible]

LL: ...before the doctor comments, let me tell you this, the Fish & Wildlife Service says the spotted owls are being killed by the barred owls, so I'm just saying what they are saying. I wanted the doctor on, because he's made the point that there is no evidence that the spotted owl is being killed by the barred owl, with the exception of that one instance of one report, which is a pretty anecdotal case, but as far as being corrected, it's the federal government of the United States of America that is saying spotted owls are being killed by barred owls. So I'm kind of stuck with that fact. I had him on specifically to talk about the fact that that may not be the case and there isn't any evidence that it's the case, so...

C: Well let me, if I can, and I'm not sure, so I'm asking...

LL: Well do it quickly. Don't beat around the bush. Do it quickly so we can get back to the Doc.

C: My understanding is that the barred owls are squeezing the spotted owls out of the territory, that they are an invasive species that is breeding better in that habitat, they are not killing them, but they are eating all the food and taking all the nesting spaces, so the spotted owls are gone and that...

LL: Doc, didn't you tell me that it's the barred owl is breeding with the spotted owl? They are not pushing them out; they are having babies with them?

BZ: Viable babies.

LL: Viable babies.

BZ: Yup.

C: And how then do you tell the difference between the barred owl that is coming in and the spotted owl that is breeding with it? You say there is no difference, yet they are cross breeding.

BZ: Yup, it's pretty odd, isn't it? It's the most common owl in North America is the hoot owl, which is the barred owl, but the whole idea of trying to do selective breeding with wild animal populations at the expense of billions of dollars and tens of thousands of families, doesn't add up. It's crazy.

LL: So there is a...

C: [inaudible]

LL: Hold on, hold on, Charles. There is a visual, a slight visual difference between the barred owl and the spotted owl and you can tell those apart, but when they breed together, you said they produce what they are jokingly, I guess jokingly, calling what they are calling sparred owls, spotted barred owls, right?

BZ: Yup.

LL: And they have characteristics of both.

BZ: They look about the same as both. If we take a couple different races of people and breed them, there would be way more differences, than between the offspring of those two owls.

LL: Charles, does that make sense?

C: Well yes and no. It's one thing like you mentioned habitat, then we have twice as many people in Detroit, but habitat is more than just physical space, it's all the things that you need to live. The reason there aren't as many people in Detroit is that the economic opportunity, i.e., food....

LL: Jobs. Yeah...

C: You know, gone from that area.

LL: Doc is there any shortage of food for owls in the Northwest?

BZ: Well there is a lot more in clearcuts, one of your people said that it was spotted owls or clearcuts, which is kind of silly. But they are eating rodents. Rodents grow in clearcuts, openings, also in old growth.

LL: And not in the deep, dark forests as much, right?

BZ: Right.

LL: So Charles, does that make sense? When you stop logging for 25 or 30 years, and you have forests that don't get cut down and replanted, which makes clearcuts in open areas and meadows, you have fewer rats out there for the owls to eat.

C: Yeah, that makes sense. I mean as you change the ecosystems, your animals that depend on it are going to change.

LL: Well but they are changing it by not cutting it down and not letting it burn down, which are really the two options for a forest when it gets old. Am I wrong Doc?

BZ: Well he said ecosystem and change and it doesn't matter if it's the Columbus Day Storm or clearcutting or a Safeway parking lot, it's always changing, so the dynamics are always changing, so that habitat is always changing, so these populations are always changing and it's significant that 99% of the populations have been dependent on habitat through time are extinct way before carbon dioxide or clearcutting.

LL: What do you say Charles? I'll give you the last word.

C: I'll tell you what. I disagree with about everything you say, but I enjoy the show, Lars [laughs].

LL: [Laughs] Well thank you and that's what it's all about. Hey doctor, it's a pleasure to have you on. Where can people find what you write on the web?

BZ: I think the best thing is www.ORWW.org, the non-profit I work with and the articles found in Cristy Rein's magazine, which is on your Facebook page and it's got a subscription to *Oregon Fish & Wildlife Journal*.

LL: And boy did we get a lot of comments both directions on that! Doc, thanks for coming on. We appreciate it.

BZ: You bet. Thank you, Lars.

LL: Dr. Bob Zybach with us. We've got all kinds of things to talk about today. We've got spotted owls, we've got lesbians in taxi cabs, we've got this: if you pick up a couple and you put them in the back of your cab and they start misbehaving. By your definition or theirs are you free to tell them to get out or only if they are straights? You got the Lars Larson Show.

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