

by Chris Eberly and
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Managing Habitat for Owls at Fort Huachuca



Susan C. Galentine

The Mexican spotted owl is among the species protected by environmental efforts at Fort Huachuca.

Birdwatchers know southeast Arizona as one of the premier birding destinations in the United States. The diversity of habitats on or adjacent to Fort Huachuca—from San Pedro River riparian forests to montane grasslands, high elevation riparian, Madrean woodlands, and pine–oak and mixed conifer forest—make the 73,000-acre (29,540-hectare) installation a primary destination for birders. The biggest draws at Fort Huachuca include the Mexican jay, bridled titmouse, painted redstart, gray vireo, sulfur-bellied flycatcher, elegant trogon, buff-breasted flycatcher, Montezuma quail, Gould's wild turkey, and zone-tailed hawk. However, it is the Mexican spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis lucida*) that most often attracts birders to Fort Huachuca.

The Mexican spotted owl was listed as threatened in 1993 due to the historical alteration of its habitat and the danger of catastrophic wildfire. Seventeen occupied spotted owl territories have been identified in the Huachuca Mountains, with up to eight of these occurring on Fort Huachuca itself. Because Fort Huachuca has an approved Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan (INRMP), it is exempt by law from the requirement to designate critical habitat for the owl. Also excluded were Fort Wingate, New Mexico; Fort Carson, Colorado; and the U.S. Naval Observatory Flagstaff Station in Arizona. The management plans for each of these sites incorporate considerations for, and demonstrate a benefit to, the Mexican spotted owl. The absence of DoD lands in critical habitat designation does not lessen the department's responsibility for endangered species management. Instead, it represents a partnership between the Fish and Wildlife Service and DoD and acknowledges that appro-

priate management plans are being implemented.

In fact, Fort Huachuca has several plans for conservation of the spotted owl and its habitat. The INRMP addresses the management of numerous sensitive species, including the owl and its habitat. It contains 18 measures to reduce impacts of military activities on listed species and their habitat. A separate Endangered Species Management Plan designed specifically for the owl is near completion. It will pull together the various conservation measures identified in the INRMP for implementation.

Management of wildland fuels and fire is a significant component to protecting owl habitat. Fort Huachuca works with the Forest Service through a mutual aid agreement, which brings additional partnerships with local fire departments. Owl habitat typically contains rugged terrain and heavy fuel loads that prevent effective prescribed burning or mechanical thinning. A comprehensive Fort Huachuca Fire Management Plan integrates fire prevention and response activities by partners to prevent catastrophic wildfires. The plan identifies areas where fire suppression will be focused, as well as areas where fire will be allowed to burn if it does not threaten habitat for the owl or other listed species. Prescribed burning in grasslands and savannahs at the base of the mountains keeps wildfires from spreading into steep, forested areas used by the owls.

The Fort Huachuca natural resources staff has to balance the demands for recreational birding access and endangered species management with the primary task of supporting the military training mission. Scheelite Canyon, a beautiful canyon with tremendous diversity, is

home to perhaps one of the best known territories for the Mexican spotted owl on public land. While this owl species can be somewhat intolerant of disturbance by humans, the nesting success in Scheelite Canyon over many years is comparable to other territories in the Huachuclas. There is a high degree of awareness that recreation, wildland fire, and other human activities represent potential impacts to endangered and threatened species. Access to canyon areas is limited to daylight hours, and playing tapes to elicit bird response is prohibited. On upper canyon trails, groups are limited to 12 people, who must stay on trails and may not smoke (to minimize fire risk). Management is adaptive and active, and helps minimize soil and habitat impacts, which can reduce the availability of prey items for the owls. The Fort Huachuca staff works hard to make sure the birding public does not “love the bird to death.” With their efforts, appropriate levels of recreation and other activities can be accommodated into the future.

Because Fort Huachuca is not large enough to maintain a viable owl population, efforts are also focused on region-wide initiatives and partnerships in the Huachuca Mountains. As demonstrated through initiatives such as Partners in Flight, conservation is most effectively achieved through collaborative efforts like those involving the Mexican spotted owl and Fort Huachuca. Partnerships allow recovery efforts to proceed while accommodating public recreational access and protecting the military training mission.

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Colby Henley



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Mexican spotted owl habitat at Woodcutters Cliff.