

# The CSERC Newsletter

*Like a stone tossed into still water, knowledge about environmental issues can ripple outward far beyond its beginning point, and perhaps return in a wave of concern, active involvement, and greater awareness of nature in the mountains and foothills around us.*



## This is a fen, and here's why fens need protection

The fen at right is in a remote wild area of the Stanislaus Forest. Many people who care about the Sierra Nevada ecosystem may not know what a fen is, or why fens are ecologically important.

Fens are an uncommon type of wetland that depends upon centuries or millennia of cold, persistent groundwater that saturates the soil to create unique habitat. The oxygen-deprived soil conditions result in the formation of peat in layers that provide habitat for special status species (such as the red-colored carnivorous sun dew in the photo below). A key identifying criteria for a fen is the requirement for it to have at least 40 cm of peat in the upper 80 cm of the soil profile.

Fens are one of the most sensitive habitat types occurring in the region. Forest Service regulations require fens to be restored and preserved - yet, in reality, USFS range managers do little to prevent livestock from pocking and trampling fens. **It can take 1,000 years for an inch of peat in a fen to form, but in just days, livestock can trample whole sections of a fen.**



For decades CSERC has worked to defend fens that we discover in the region. We strongly complain to agency officials whenever we find fens suffering from livestock effects (which unfortunately we did this past month). In some cases, CSERC has been allowed to help erect fencing or log barriers, but most known fens within the Stanislaus Forest (and the rare plants within the fens) are not effectively protected.



## As the CA spotted owl moves closer to being formally listed as “threatened,” the Forest Service releases new policies for projects

For decades the Northern Spotted Owl and the California Spotted Owl have each been used by environmental groups in lawsuits aimed at blocking the logging of large trees and to curtail clearcuts on national forest lands. In Washington, Oregon, and coastal areas of Northern California, the Northern Spotted Owl was a prime reason why courts significantly restricted logging.

In the Sierra Nevada, the Forest Service chose the California Spotted Owl (CSO) to be an “indicator species” to determine if altering late seral habitat (“old growth”) would affect other species. If reproducing owls were present, owl Territories of 1,000 acres were established. A 300-acre core Protected Activity Center (PAC) in each Territory was given special protection; and logging in the Territories was required to be done by selecting individual trees (thinning logging) rather than clearcuts.



All of this created the backdrop for research studies and debates over recent years as to whether or not Spotted Owls in the Sierra Nevada are either adequately protected or are still facing the threat of extinction. **After years of studies, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service formally declared its intent to list the California Spotted Owl as “threatened.” In response, the Forest Service has now released new owl policies that CSERC fears may limit forest treatments that reduce the risk of high-severity wildfires (which would benefit owls).**

Views on the new owl policies can differ based on differing ways to protect wildlife and manage forests. The new policies require projects to avoid or minimize any short-term disturbance to Spotted Owls and their habitat. So rather than reducing fire risk, the Region’s focus is to keep the dense, closed-canopy forest conditions favored by the owls.

In contrast, CSERC and some USFS staff only support keeping dense closed-canopy conditions in the 300 acres around the owls’ nest stand. We advocate for doing aggressive thinning logging and biomass fuel treatments in Territories and in the General Forest to “open up” dense, thick forest stands. As they now exist, if a hot wildfire reaches a Territory, the dense-growing small and midsize trees often burn so severely that large, older trees are all killed. **CSERC opposes wildlife policies that prevent getting forests back into a more open, fire-resistant condition.** We see short term impacts to owl habitat as trade-offs for forest resilience in the long term.

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**CSERC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization working to protect the water, wildlife, and wild places of the Northern Yosemite region. CSERC relies entirely on grants and donations from people like you to do that critical mission.**

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# At the same time, a new U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plan will authorize the lethal removal of Barred Owls to save CA Spotted Owls

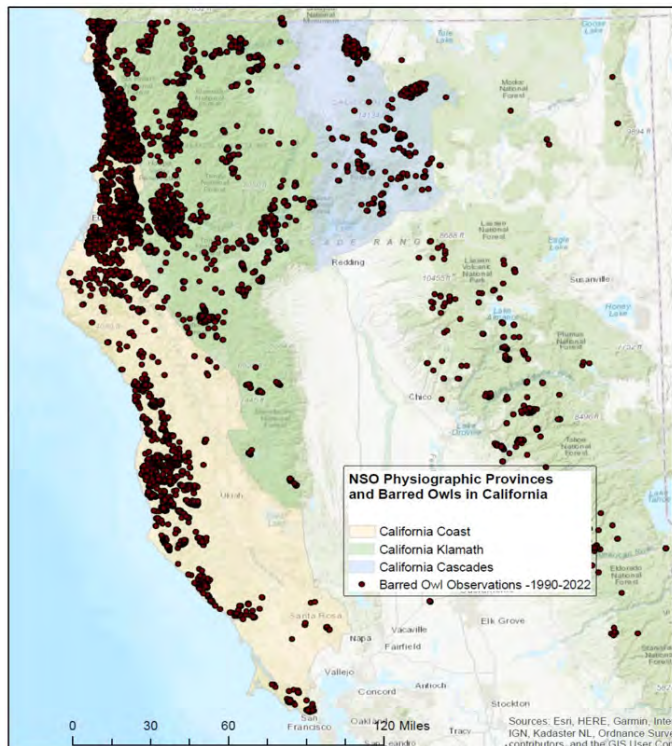
It's a "wicked" problem that has no easy solution. Over more than a century, short-sighted forest management resulted in a major decline in the population of Spotted Owls. Then in recent decades, the larger and more dominant Barred Owl has invaded the Pacific Northwest and the northern portion of the Sierra Nevada. Due to its size, its greater adaptability to a much wider range of habitat conditions, and its broader diet, **the Barred Owl has been proven to out-compete Spotted Owls - often aggressively driving them out of their critical breeding habitat.**



The highly invasive Barred Owl has been identified by federal agency wildlife scientists as a primary threat to the survival of the native Spotted Owl which is showing a significant population decline.

Starting more than a decade ago, research studies proved that the shooting of Barred Owls resulted in Spotted Owls often reoccupying previously abandoned territories and then breeding successfully.

Now in a new Barred Owl management plan to benefit Spotted Owls, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is authorizing the lethal removal (shooting) of Barred Owls by trained specialists under certain strict conditions. USFWS estimates that 1/2 of 1% of the overall Barred Owl population would be removed annually. **Some object to the killing of one species to aid another, but Spotted Owls could go extinct without active intervention.**



**Map A4-1.** Barred owl detections in the California provinces 1990 to 2022. This distribution partially reflects the location of survey efforts for spotted owls.

Here are ways to help distinguish between the two species of owls:

### The difference in the Owls' call:

- Barred Owls tend to give an eight-note "Who cooks for you; Who cooks for you".
- California Spotted Owls tend to make hoots that sound like the barking of a dog, and they also make whistling sounds. Their main call is a series of 4 hoots: "Hoo, hoo-hoo, whoooooo."

### Color patterns:

- Barred Owls have vertical brown and light barring or streaking on the belly and lower chest. They have light-colored facial disks.
- California Spotted Owl have quite different light spots on the belly and lower chest. Their facial disks are dark brown with contrasting pale marks that form an X between the eyes.

## Barred Owl detections through 2022



# WORKDAYS OFFER CHANCE TO HAVE FUN AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Ackerson Meadow is a biodiversity hotspot, but a century of livestock impacts along with water diversions and road building combined to significantly degrade the meadow. Last fall, the first phase of a gigantic restoration project was done. A long section of the meadow's gully was filled with soil, and jute fabric was placed across areas to prepare for revegetation.

This summer, contract crews and groups of volunteers (including CSERC staff and members) have worked under the guidance of Yosemite Park specialists to do key restoration tasks. Last month, CSERC volunteers planted native vegetation and did seed collection.

It was a fun, successful workday with kudos from Park staff and lots of praise from our volunteers. We even got a tour at the end of the workday to view partly restored wetland areas and to see western pond turtles that were being moved to safe sites while work is being done.

## CSERC plans a second Ackerson Meadow workday project on Monday, August 12<sup>th</sup>.

It would be great to have even more volunteers join us to help restore this large, iconic meadow area. There is always a chance to view not only pond turtles, but great gray owls and other at-risk species.

It's important for Chelsea of our staff to know early how many volunteers will attend. Please reach out to her - either by emailing her at: [chelsea@cserc.org](mailto:chelsea@cserc.org) or calling her at our office at (209) 586-7440.

**Please spread the word to anyone who may want to volunteer.** Thank you!





# The national Old-Growth Policy shifts to the analysis of alternatives, but none of the strategies actually prohibit cutting big, old trees

Two years ago, the Forest Service launched a high-level inventory of “Old-Growth and Mature” forests on BLM and USFS lands. That was followed by an “Analysis of Threats” that concluded that severe wildfires along with drought, insects, and disease are the main threats to old-growth, and that “...*tree cutting is a relatively minor threat.*” What that analysis failed to point out is that **federal agencies can control tree cutting, but they have little control over wildfires, droughts, and insect outbreaks.** Logging and road building into old-growth forest areas are what agencies can control.

Back in December the Forest Service proposed a National Old-Growth Amendment that would be added to the Forest Plan for each national forest across the country. The broadly worded Amendment is intended to provide protective measures for old-growth forest conditions and to incorporate local indigenous knowledge in the stewardship of old-growth forests.

While that all may seem positive, it is hard to over-state how nebulous, non-measurable, and “mushy” the whole process has become. The Amendment does not restrict the cutting of old-growth trees, nor does it require a local national forest to avoid other impacts to old-growth forest areas. Instead, the process has been designed to be “flexible” and to allow each national forest to judge how best to meet old-growth goals.

**In addition to the “no action” alternative, there are three “action” alternatives that would establish guidance for individual national forests. Alternative 2 is the preferred alternative, and it allows old-growth stewardship actions to be achieved by commercial timber harvest (logging).** Alternative 3 includes a requirement that old-growth stewardship shall not result in commercial timber harvest, but it still allows limited logging in old growth forests for other “incidental” reasons. Alternative 4 goes to the other extreme, directing that timber production will be a primary driver for old-growth forest stewardship. What is buried in the text is that the entire old-growth amendment is simply intended to be a programmatic guide for future management, and it does not authorize or compel any on-the-ground action.



The public is unlikely to trust the USFS to manage old growth forests across the nation based upon nebulous language such as “proactive stewardship” - especially when there are no precise maps that identify which areas actually meet old-growth definitions and criteria.

The overall intent is positive. The outcome will depend on how local forest officials choose to interpret the final policy.



## ***“Here’s why we donate regularly to CSERC.”***



*“We gladly contribute each year to CSERC because we know that the staff serves as a strong voice for nature in every environmental issue that affects our vast region.*

*We think it's important not to take for granted the peace that can be found in the wildness of the Stanislaus National Forest. It's what recharges us! We've spent our entire adult lives hiking, paddling, and camping right here in our own back yard.*

*We're especially grateful that the CSERC staff are vigilant watchdogs in the local national forest where we personally love to recreate. We've always felt motivated to show our gratitude by financially supporting CSERC. It's critical that they continue to be able to afford to do their important work.”*

**Jill and Shawn Seale** are the long-time owners of the Sierra Nevada Adventure Company. Their SNAC stores in Murphys, Sonora, and Arnold offer outdoor recreation gear and rentals of kayaks, canoes, and paddle boards during the summer season and many items for winter, too. Shawn and Jill are key examples of CSERC members whose donations help provide essential funding for CSERC’s advocacy and watchdog efforts.

Many of you who are receiving this newsletter also contribute to CSERC and support our wide range of programs, monitoring, media work, advocacy, and fieldwork. Unfortunately, over the past year, roughly half of all our newsletter recipients haven’t donated even a small contribution. CSERC depends entirely upon member donations and unpredictable grants for essential funding to do our work across the region.



**If you value CSERC’s efforts on behalf of water, wildlife, and wild places, we ask for your support.**

**Please donate any amount that is right for you. Each donation matters.**



**You can send us YOUR photo and why you support CSERC. We can then publish your picture and words like we've done with these supporters.**

“Owl bet you'll enjoy donating to CSERC as much as I do.”



“I have to admit I'm nuts about CSERC!”



“Our whole family sings the praises of the CSERC staff and all they accomplish!”

“I keep raven to all my friends about how important it is to donate and to give CSERC support.”



**Your photo (and your sharing of why you donate) can be even more compelling. Send to: [info@cserc.org](mailto:info@cserc.org)**

(Or a donation without a photo is also fine.)



## Unlike most newsletters, this one emphasizes how much we need you and other members to help us grow our base of contributors

For years each quarterly CSERC newsletter has focused on the latest environmental threats, rare wildlife attracted to our remote cameras, updates about critical water issues, and other important articles to inform those of you who are newsletter recipients.

We intentionally minimize requests for donations and mostly share conservation updates and photos of precious places or at-risk species that we work to defend. That emphasis on our mission and the beauty of our region minimizes distractions (such as us urging you to contribute). **But now we openly ask for your help.**



**The bottom line is that CSERC needs more donors. We need to significantly increase our members and build a broader base of supporting partners who will contribute some amount each year. One key step is to gain the attention of those of you who care about our work but haven't gotten around to donating in the past year or longer.** It will be meaningful if each of you who reads this newsletter will simply donate any amount this year. We thank all who have already done so.

**A second key step is to ask you to do one of the following:**

- A) Can you email a friend, family member, fellow worker, or someone else to share this link to CSERC's website and encourage them to consider joining? [www.cserc.org](http://www.cserc.org)
- B) Or can you hand this newsletter to someone who may share the desire to protect this region? And can you mention that you support CSERC and hope that they will consider supporting CSERC as well?

**On the following page we highlight a few of the many ways that CSERC serves on the frontlines of advocacy for the Northern Yosemite region. Most of you are already aware of much of what we do. If it matters to you, then partner with us by donating and by inviting someone you know to consider joining.**

*"I otter donate before I forget, and I can also ask my friends to consider joining CSERC as well. Should I email them or give them the newsletter?"*





## Here are some of the key efforts that CSERC is doing this summer

If you drive along the main highways in the national forest or visit one of the region's rivers, you may not see any obvious signs of threats to nature. That's due in part to decades of past environmental advocacy by CSERC and other conservation groups. But often there are current "not readily visible" ecological threats that are the focus of our Center's monitoring, fieldwork, and engagement at important meetings.

### LIVESTOCK IMPACTS IN FOREST MEADOWS

As part of our fieldwork, CSERC staff discovered that a fence to keep cattle out of the Research Natural Area at Bourland Meadow was not put up as required. Last year our monitoring of livestock trespass at the site led to CSERC filing complaints at the Region 5 level of the Forest Service. Now we've once again found the required fence lying on the ground with a long section of fence line left wide open.



At another sensitive meadow, our staff also found that no exclusion fence is in place to protect two fens. Damage by pocking from livestock can destroy centuries of peat development and unique plant habitat.

### PROTECTING WATER AND ADEQUATE FLOWS IN RIVERS

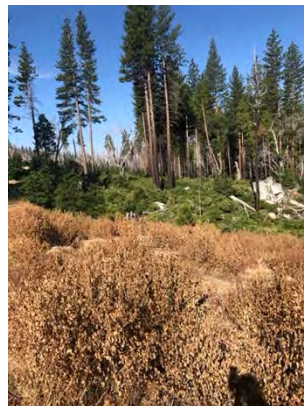
Over recent months our Center has been partnering with the Tuolumne River Trust to try to gain a long-delayed flow management plan for the Upper Tuolumne River. In a separate plan for the South Fork Stanislaus River, CSERC is the only NGO group participating in final negotiations - plus we are actively opposing the transfer of Lyons Reservoir and Pinecrest Lake from PG&E to a local water district that is far less likely to abide by environmental requirements.



### WILDLIFE, LAND PLANNING, YOSEMITE, AND MORE...

We're maintaining photo-detection cameras set up in remote areas to locate rare wildlife. We've talked directly with Yosemite Park officials about the crisis over how to manage crowds and too many vehicles in the Park. We've submitted detailed comments for proposed development projects in the region.

Our staff is playing a lead role in planning a massive MAC forest treatment project. We monitor the use of herbicides (as in the photo at right). We visit logging sites, fuel breaks, and prescribed burn units. We're participating in many forest and watershed stakeholder group meetings. We work with the media, lead restoration workdays, and do so much more...





# Final wildlife damage plan by state/federal agencies dismisses input from CSERC and others who asked for less controversial methods

Up to now, “wildlife damage management” (WDM) by agencies has meant widespread shooting, traps, and poison baits to kill wildlife seen as pests or as threats to profits by agricultural interests. Taxpayer dollars have funded the killing of thousands of foxes, bears, river otters, beavers, coyotes, herons, mountain lions, bobcats, and many other species.



This spring CSERC submitted highly detailed input asking Wildlife Services (the federal agency) and California Food and Agriculture to jointly agree to shift to less drastic measures to “control” wildlife.

**CSERC urged that lethal WDM methods only be used when there is a true risk to humans, or endangered species, or at specific locations such as airports where bird collisions with planes can be deadly.**



CSERC also urged ending the use of inhumane lethal methods such as neck snares, “denning” of coyote pups, or the use of poison baits. We urged non-lethal alternatives, and we especially pushed for “no WDM killing of animals on public lands.” Many concerned citizens also submitted their personal comments opposing the use of lethal methods to primarily benefit ranchers and other agricultural interests.



Sadly, the agencies rejected all public requests to scale back taxpayer-funded killing of “nuisance” wildlife. They asserted that restricting the use of lethal methods was not “reasonable.” And in response to CSERC urging the use of less controversial methods, the claim was made: “*Dissent does not equate with controversy*” – showing the obvious bias of the agency officials. The agencies insist that risk is low from using poison baits and chemicals; and their decision denied requests to restrict lethal treatments on public lands, including in parks, national forests, and designated Wilderness areas.



## INTERESTED IN SOME SPECIAL DESTINATIONS TO VISIT THIS SUMMER?

There are truly wonderful wild areas in the Emigrant Wilderness, the Carson-Iceberg Wilderness, and the Mokelumne Wilderness in the Stanislaus Forest; and there are vast wild areas in Yosemite National Park. A Wilderness adventure takes planning and effort, but wilderness solitude and core connections with nature amidst wildlife, scenic vistas, and wildflowers can be hard to beat. Wilderness permits are available online.

### Here are four day-trip alternatives to consider:

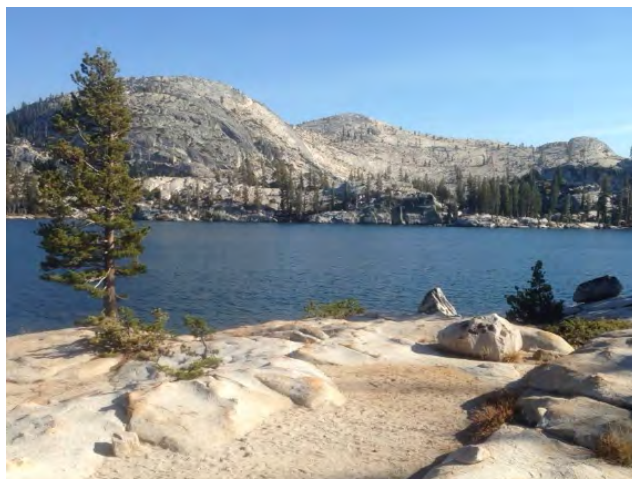
The South Grove at Big Trees State Park has a huge number of giant Sequoias, an understory of dogwoods, along with large and noisy pileated woodpeckers. The South Grove is being prepped for a fall prescribed burn, so lots of fuel reduction work may be visible. Union, Utica, and Spicer Reservoirs off Highway 4 each offer different water-based experiences whether camping, hikes and day use, or kayaks and canoes.

Bourland Meadow off 3N01 roughly 45 minutes south of Long Barn is a prime wet meadow scenic area with the least number of other visitors. The Bennett Juniper (accessed by 5N01) lies to the west of Sardine Meadow. It features the world's largest known juniper, as well as scenic views of rocky terrain and upper elevation forests. Each area has its own unique reasons for visits, and each is worth the journey to get there.

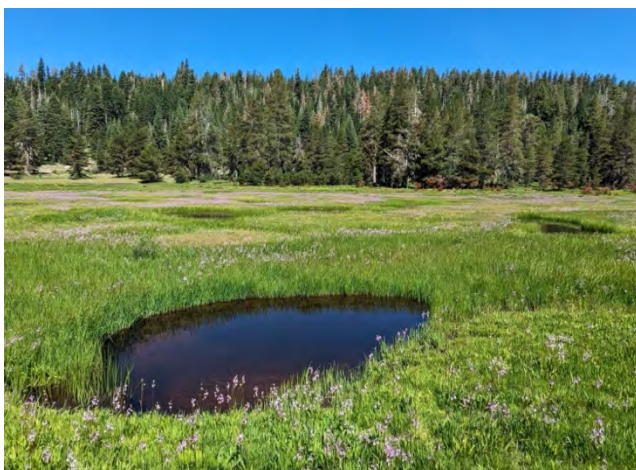
#### South Grove at Calaveras Big Trees State Park



#### Union, Utica, and Spicer Reservoirs



#### Bourland Meadow



#### Bennett Juniper





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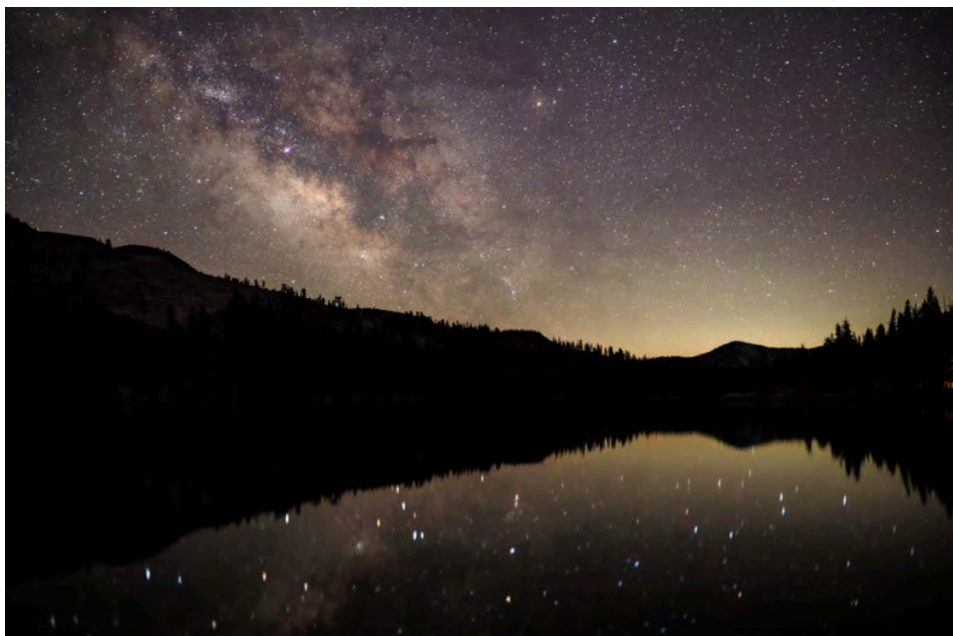
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## Past the glare of all the lights

In early July, the National Park Service featured this impressive photo of the Milky Way viewed at Tenaya Lake in Yosemite. The Park staff encouraged the public to come to the Park prepared to star-gaze.



High-country locations such as Tuolumne Meadows and Glacier Point can provide prime star-gazing opportunities if clouds are absent and there is no smoke from wildfires.

However, to get the best views of the Milky Way and the night sky, it's important to seek out times such as July 24 – August 7 when the moon won't be overhead to create glare. Take time to adjust your eyes to the darkness. Then be amazed at what we normally miss seeing in brightly lit areas.

