



# The Mexican Spotted Owl

*on the  
Colorado  
Plateau*

Recovery Update

Spring 1998

## Purpose of the Recovery Update

THIS IS THE FIRST in a series of newsletters planned to provide information on the Mexican spotted owl on the Colorado Plateau. The Colorado Plateau includes southern Utah, southern Colorado, and northern Arizona and New Mexico. This owl was listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act April 15, 1993. Efforts to recover the owl and ultimately remove it from the threatened list have already begun. Recovery efforts will focus on maintaining and increasing habitat across the range, maintaining population numbers and developing a long range management plan. Groups of local community and state and federal agency people have been formed to promote communications among local interest groups. These groups will develop recommendations to implement this process and resolve local issues. Future newsletters will explain these efforts.

## Where Are They Found?

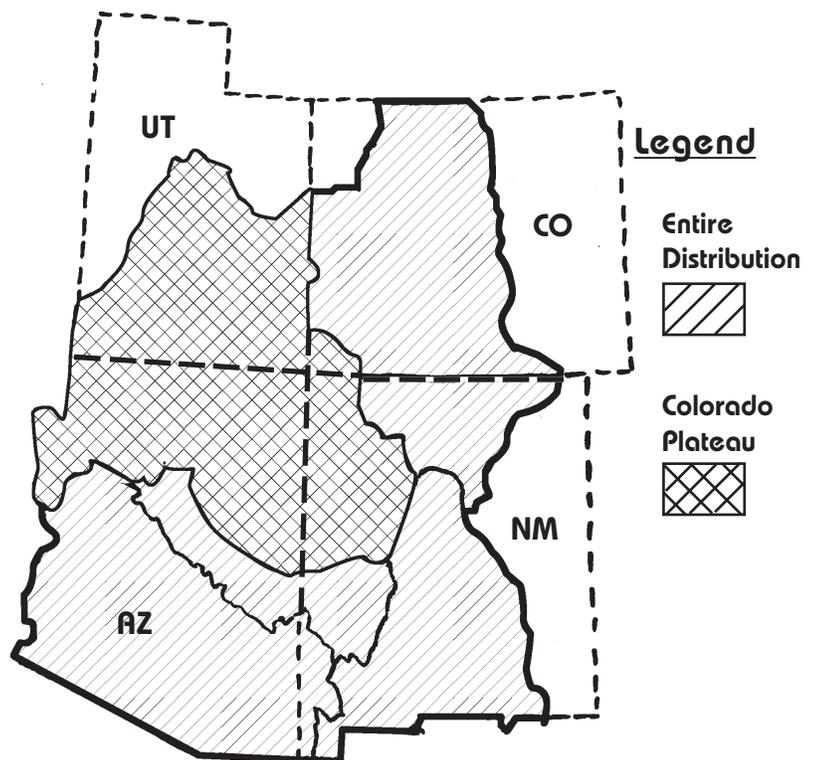
Extensive surveys (>500,000 acres) of forested land in the Colorado Plateau indicate that owls are usually not found in large forests but typically occur in steep-walled rocky canyons below 8,000 feet elevation with no or few trees. Nests in southern Utah have only been found in caves, cracks or ledges in these steep-walled canyons. Typical areas in southern Utah include the canyon areas in Zion National Park, Capitol Reef National Park, Canyonlands and canyons of the Abajo Mountains.

## What Are They?

The Mexican Spotted Owl is a large owl with dark eyes. Its name comes from the large irregular brown and white spots on its abdomen, back, and head. Adult owls are 18 inches tall and weigh less than one pound, about the size of a loaf of bread. If you saw this owl, it probably wouldn't fly away, since they seem to be quite curious, rather than fearful of humans. The brown eyes, large size and large white spots would be distinctive and make the owl easy to recognize, if you saw it during the day. At night you might listen for its distinctive call which has been likened to a barking dog or monkey. There are three subspecies of spotted owls: Northern, California and Mexican. These owls differ in geographical location, physical appearance and habitat. The Mexican spotted owl is the only subspecies found in the Colorado Plateau. The habitat of the Mexican spotted owl appears to be quite different from the old growth forests that the Northern spotted owl nests in.

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## Mexican Spotted Owl Distribution



## What do they eat?

Although the Mexican spotted owl eats a variety of mammals, birds, reptiles and insects, the bulk of its diet is woodrat, deermice and voles. The owl usually forages from sunset to daylight. They catch their prey by sitting in a tree or on a ledge until the prey is identified and diving on it.



## How do they reproduce?

Spotted owls do not build nests, but use available structures such as mistletoe platforms or large cavities in trees and ledges or crevices in canyon walls. The owls nest primarily in dense forest or rocky canyons. In southern Utah and Colorado most of the nests are in caves or on cliff ledges inside steep-walled canyons. Elsewhere in its range, however, the majority of nests appear to be in trees. Spotted owls first breed at two to three years of age. Adults are solitary during the fall and pairs begin to roost together in February or March. Adults occupy the same breeding territory year after year. Spotted owls have very low reproductive rates compared to other owls, laying an average of



two eggs, but they do not breed every year. The eggs are laid and incubated only by the female and the male feeds the female and eventually the young. The young leave the nest before they can fly and remain with the adults for at least a

month. The young may or may not leave the nesting area in the fall.

## What limits their numbers?

Adult owls have high survival rates (80-90%) and may live up to 16 years. However, their low reproductive rate of two young every few years really affects their numbers because only 20% of the young owls survive to adulthood. Starvation is a major cause of juvenile death, although predators such as great horned owls and the northern goshawk may also be a factor.

# Where can you go to learn more?

- ★ See the Mexican spotted owl HOME PAGE for further information and further opportunities for your input: <http://www.usgs.nau.edu>
- ★ Watch for development of a Mexican spotted owl fact sheet specific to the Colorado Plateau Recovery Unit. The fact sheet will be developed as part of Project Wild Notebook Series, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.
- ★ To continue receiving this update, get on the mailing list by contacting Frank Howe, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources or Susan MacVean, Arizona Fish and Game Department.
- ★ Order the Mexican spotted owl recovery Plan. USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. 1995. Order from: Fish and Wildlife Reference Service, 5430 Grosvenor Lane, Suite 110, Bethesda, MD 20814.
- ★ Attend the Mexican Spotted Owl Symposium October 2, 1998, at the Raptor Research Foundation. Meetings will be held in Ogden, Utah. See this website for more details: [catsis.weber.edu/rmf](http://catsis.weber.edu/rmf)

**QUESTIONS . . . ?**  
**OR**  
**COMMENTS? ?**

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS, CONTACT ONE OF THE TEAM MEMBERS LISTED UNDER "WORKING TEAM MEMBER LIST" IN THIS NEWSLETTER.

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**QUESTIONS FROM YOU,  
ANSWERS FROM US**

# **MORE ON MEXICAN SPOTTED OWLS**

**Question:** Why haven't I ever seen a Mexican spotted owl?

**Answer:** On the Colorado Plateau, Mexican spotted owls live in remote canyon systems with steep slopes; these areas are inaccessible to most people. In addition the owl is nocturnal - active only from just after sunset to just before sunrise. Finally, the owl lives in low numbers even in the most concentrated habitat areas. This combination of remote inaccessible habitat, nocturnal behavior, and low numbers make it unlikely that most people will ever encounter the owl.

**Question:** What should I do if I find a Mexican Spotted Owl?

**Answer:** Please call your local Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, Arizona Game and Fish, Colorado Division of Wildlife or New Mexico Game and Fish office.

**Question:** Why do Mexican spotted owls in the Colorado Plateau appear to nest only in caves or ledges within steep walled canyons instead of in trees?

**Answer:** No one knows for sure, but several ideas are currently being tested. Perhaps only steep-walled canyons are cool and humid enough during the hot dry summers in southern Utah. Or maybe it's the best place for owls to find plenty of their favorite prey - woodrat. Perhaps mixed conifer woodlands are too harsh during the winter.

## **MEXICAN SPOTTED OWL COLORADO PLATEAU RECOVERY UNIT Working Team Membership List**

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