

SPRING CREEK

Great Gray Owl

MANAGEMENT AREA

Authors

EVELYN L. BULL is a research wildlife biologist, USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, 1401 Gekeler Lane, La Grande, Oregon 97850; and ARLENE K. BLUMTON is a wildlife biologist, USDA Forest Service, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, La Grande Ranger District, 3502 Hwy. 30, La Grande, Oregon 97850.

Cooperators

Wallowa-Whitman National Forest
Pacific Northwest Research Station
Blue Mountain Audubon Society
Grande Ronde Bird Club

For Additional Information

Contact the La Grande Ranger District, 3502 Hwy. 30, La Grande, Oregon 97850. Phone (541) 963-7186.

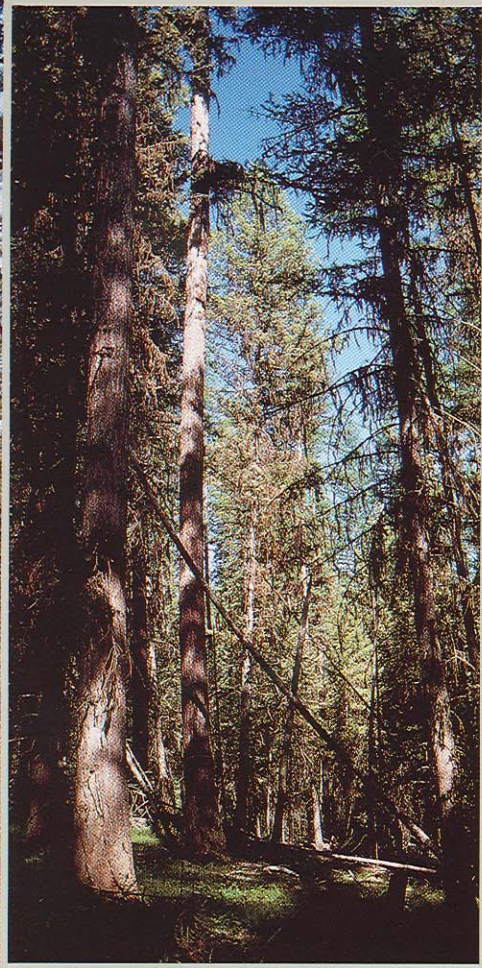


Pacific Northwest Research Station
P.O. Box 3890
Portland, OR 97208

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest Service
June 1993

PREPARED BY
Pacific Northwest
Research Station



Introduction

A unique population of great gray owls was discovered in the Blue Mountains in the 1980s in an area called Spring Creek. This population is unique because of the high density of birds (at least eight pairs in 4 square miles) and because they have nested every year, except one, since 1982.

The Spring Creek area was logged in the 1970s leaving open, parklike stands of ponderosa pine with islands of denser stands of Douglas-fir. The owls hunt in the open stands of pine and nest in the dense Douglas-fir habitats, which provide shade and protection from avian predators, such as ravens and great horned owls.

Originally the owls nested on vacant northern goshawk nests. Most of the owls now nest on artificial platforms, however, because the stick nests have disintegrated, and large snags, also used for nests, are not present. The artificial platforms are about 2 feet square and are placed 30-50 feet off the ground in large trees. The La Grande Ranger District of the USDA Forest Service, which manages Spring Creek area, has an ongoing program to provide nest platforms for great gray owls.



Nesting

Great grays begin courtship in Spring Creek during February and are quite vocal at that time. The calling occurs at night and is a series of low "whoos." The female food-begging call consists of a soft two-note "whoop-up."

Incubation starts from mid-March to early April and lasts 30 days. The birds are very quiet and difficult to find at this time. The female incubates the eggs and broods the young, and the male brings prey for them to eat. After the young hatch, they remain in the nest about 4 weeks. During the week before they leave the nest, or fledge, the young become quite vocal, begging with a loud "shreeek." They normally remain near their nest for about 2 to 3 weeks after they fledge.

Time to Visit

The best time to observe great gray owls in the Spring Creek area is between mid-May and early June. At this time, the young are leaving the nest. The young are very vocal during the early evening and morning, and the adults hunt during these times.

To find the birds, search the activity areas shown on the map in the early evening. Listen for juvenile begging calls and adult hoots, and watch for the hunting adults.

Photos

Top right: Female great gray owl and two nestlings on a nest on top of a dead tree.

Middle: Great gray owl nesting on an artificial platform.

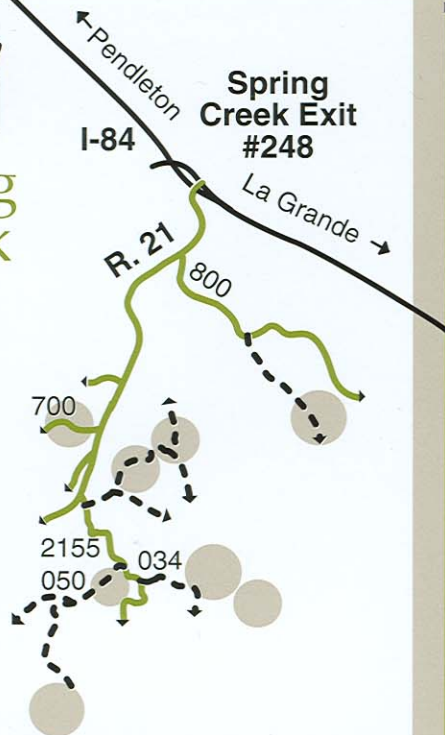
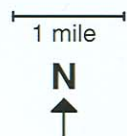
Bottom: Juvenile great gray owl just out of the nest.

Top left: Unlogged old-growth stand surrounding great gray owl nest.

Background: Partially logged stand of ponderosa pine used for foraging.



Spring Creek



OPEN ROADS 
 CLOSED ROADS 
 AREAS FREQUENTED BY GREAT GRAY OWLS 

How to Get to Spring Creek

Spring Creek is 12 miles west of La Grande and 43 miles east of Pendleton. Take the Spring Creek exit off Interstate 84 and follow Forest Road 21 South for about 3 miles. Watch the road numbers until you become oriented with the map. The circled areas are where great grays often are seen and are usually a 1/4- to 1-mile walk from a road. The roads marked with solid lines are gravel and passable with cars. The dashed lines are either closed roads or dirt roads not recommended for driving. Spring Creek is also a big game winter range, so portions of the area are closed to entry from December until April. The area normally is inaccessible in the winter because of snow.

Responsible Viewing

Although great gray owls are typically docile, they defend their young fiercely. Young should not be approached closely or handled under any circumstances. In addition, keep far away from nests to avoid disturbing nesting adults. Adults flushed from nests will leave eggs or young vulnerable to ever watchful avian predators.

Observe road closure signs, which often are posted on National Forest roads. Closures give animals space to move about without being disturbed or threatened by vehicular traffic. Keep pets leashed; do not allow them to chase or harass wildlife.

Camping is permitted in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, Spring Creek area. Campers are encouraged to keep camps clean and establish sites away from streams.

Great gray owl nesting on a vacant northern goshawk nest.

