

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.



Most of us prefer environmental issues to be black vs white, good vs bad guys, and not too complex or technical



When CSERC was founded three decades ago, the Forest Service was selling clearcut timber sales that wiped out old-growth forest at a loss of taxpayers' money. Furbearers such as the Pacific fisher and the American marten were decimated by many decades of being targeted by trappers. Cattlemen left their livestock unmanaged on public lands for long periods, resulting in over-grazed meadows, eroded streambanks, and polluted streams. Issues seemed mostly black and white.

It was obvious that loggers and the Forest Service were to blame for clearcut mountainsides and wasteful logging roads punched into roadless areas. It made sense to oppose public land cattle grazing due to damaged wetlands and degraded meadows. But over many years, much has changed.

Advocacy by CSERC and others led the Forest Service to stop building roads into wild areas, to protect old-growth, and to end clearcuts. Unfortunately, the Forest Service still allows cattle to seasonally degrade meadows and to pollute streams.

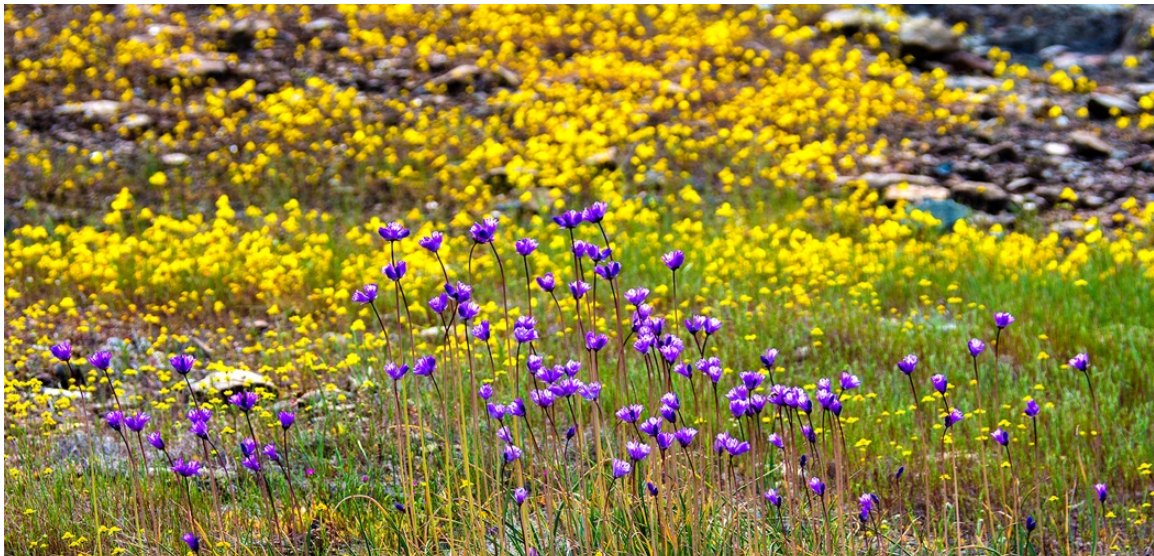
But now - instead of needing to fight the logging of old-growth trees, CSERC endorses the selective logging of medium and small trees to open up dense forest stands that are at risk from devastating wildfires. **High-severity fires are also the main threat these days to furbearers, since the trapping of fishers and martens ended long ago.**

Except for livestock grazing (our lawsuit vs the Forest Service is still in the courts), [CSERC's public forest advocacy now prioritizes the need for enough forest treatments to effectively reduce the risk of extreme wildfires](#). Megafires have become the greatest threat to not only old-growth trees, but also for many other values. In response, CSERC strives to be at the forefront in promoting ecologically sensitive actions that can reduce that extreme wildfire risk.



Spring has sprung! It's your chance to view wildflowers...

In many areas of the foothills, wildflowers have come into bloom. What better way to get outside and enjoy nature than by taking a wildflower hike?



Early blooming wildflowers such as poppies, lupines, and popcorn flowers are already visible although many areas are more patchy than in some years due to limited rains. Soon they'll be joined by other kinds of colorful wildflowers such as Mariposa lilies, shooting stars, buttercups, jewelflowers, and many more.

Now is the time to see wildflowers in the foothills before they fade away

Red Hills - Just south of Chinese Camp on Red Hills Road is a scenic area with California Goldfields, Blue Dicks, and more. A network of trails makes the Red Hills a great place to wander around to see what special things you may stumble upon. The area (shown below) has special serpentine soils that support endemic species such as the Milkwort jewelflower that is found nowhere else! If you are interested in seeing rare plants, Red Hills is definitely a "must-see."



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***Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center
P.O. Box 396, Twain Harte, CA 95383***

Phone: (209) 586-7440
E-mail: johnb@cserc.org
Website: www.cserc.org

***CSERC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization
working to protect the water, wildlife, and wild
places of the Northern Yosemite region. CSERC
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One of the joys of spring – wildflowers can be muted or spectacular



Table Mountain -- The vernal pools on top of Table Mountain may still have a little bit of moisture, but the lack of abundant rain may mean that wildflowers are already fading this spring. Flowers or not, Table Mountain (as revealed above) is a special landscape that can feel out of this world. The volcanic rock and scenic views at the top can make you feel like you are standing on another planet.

The Table Mountain trail is located between Jamestown and New Melones. Trailhead parking is at the end of Shell Road off Rawhide Road, where the road turns to dirt. This trail is roughly 5 miles round-trip. You begin the trek on a flat trail in oak woodlands. You then work your way up the fairly steep trail to the top, where flowers can blanket the entire plateau of Table Mountain.

Westside Trail -- This historic railroad grade near Tuolumne is lined in some sections by large bush lupines, buckwheats, and other flowering plants. The parking area is located on the left off Buchanan Mine Road in Tuolumne, just before Sunrise Drive. The first 2 miles are the best for wildflower viewing. If you want to see some bonus species, you can continue to hike for another 3 miles out to the end. The trail is relatively flat and will provide scenic views of the North Fork Tuolumne River canyon and the river far below.



A bully has arrived in town – and that means trouble for the local native species that was already facing habitat loss and other threats

Forest managers in the Sierra Nevada have prioritized protection for the California Spotted Owl (at right) for decades because Forest Service scientists selected the Spotted Owl to be used as a key “indicator species.” Monitoring Spotted Owls in specific areas can help reveal whether forest management is or isn’t preserving enough essential habitat for the owl and for other old-growth forest dependent wildlife.

Now a competing species of owl is invading forests across the West - posing significant threats to Spotted Owls, including in the northern half of the Sierra Nevada region. The invader is called the “Barred Owl” – not to be confused with a completely different owl called the Barn Owl.

Like the California Spotted Owl, the Barred Owl lives in conifer forests. And similar to Spotted Owls, Barred Owls also feed mostly on small mammals and are nocturnal. However, Barred Owls are more opportunistic predators. They will also feed on snakes, small birds, insects, and even crayfish. They tolerate other Barred Owls in close proximity, more owls per area can mean more predation on a wide range of prey species. Barred Owls are also larger and more aggressive, and they have a wider range of habitat tolerance than the Spotted Owl.



California Spotted Owl

Over the last century, Barred Owls have gradually expanded their range westward from the eastern United States. They’ve been documented in the forests of British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon, and -- of importance for our local region -- **in recent years they have been detected as far south as the Eldorado National Forest, directly north of our local Stanislaus National Forest.**

Simply put, Barred Owls can drastically affect Spotted Owl populations by out-competing Spotted Owls for food and nest sites.

They breed faster; they can disperse farther; they are more aggressive, and they have even been known to interbreed with Spotted Owls -- diluting the genetic diversity of Spotted Owls. But it is their aggressive behavior and ability to out-compete Spotted Owls that make them a key threat.

Being larger, aggressive, and more adaptable makes the Barred Owl dominant when competing with the Spotted Owl



Barred Owl

Identifying a natural resource problem is one thing. Figuring out a solution can be quite another challenge. Land managers and scientists have admittedly struggled to find effective ways to stop the expansion of the Barred Owl in order to protect the already-declining population of the Spotted Owl.

In Oregon, where the Barred Owl has displaced many Spotted Owls, a lawsuit was filed years ago against a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plan to allow lumber companies to shoot Barred Owls in exchange for being allowed to log those forest areas even if Spotted Owls returned and began to use those areas again. Last month, a final court ruling sided with the federal plan and the logging companies.

While “removal” (the term used for shooting Barred Owls) is the main option so far to deal with their expanding population, understanding where Barred Owls are currently present can help forest managers to strategize when or whether to take any action.

CSERC asks you to report any sighting of a Barred Owl if you see one.

Below are some key tips and tricks to help you distinguish between the two kinds 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.”

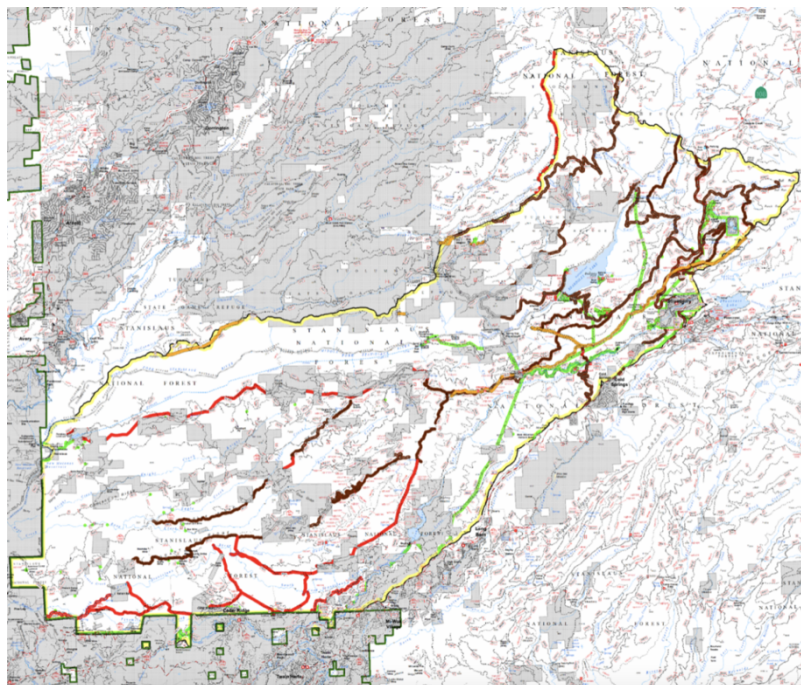
Color patterns:

- Barred Owls have vertical brown and light barring or streaking on the belly and lower chest.
- 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.

If you can get a photo of an owl that you are observing, that is the best evidence to share. Unlike some more skittish owl species, both of these owls may perch quietly during the daytime, even if people are close by. **Be on the lookout for either species!**

Forest Service gives approval to the first of three separate decisions for portions of the SERAL large landscape project

If you read our latest E-newsletter, you learned that CSERC supports the decision by Stanislaus Forest supervisor Jason Kuiken to approve “non-timber harvest” mechanical treatments to create 6,137 acres of fuelbreaks in the SERAL project area. By signing that decision, the first phase of SERAL work can begin quickly - creating miles of fuelbreaks to reduce wildfire risk for communities along the Highway 108 corridor.



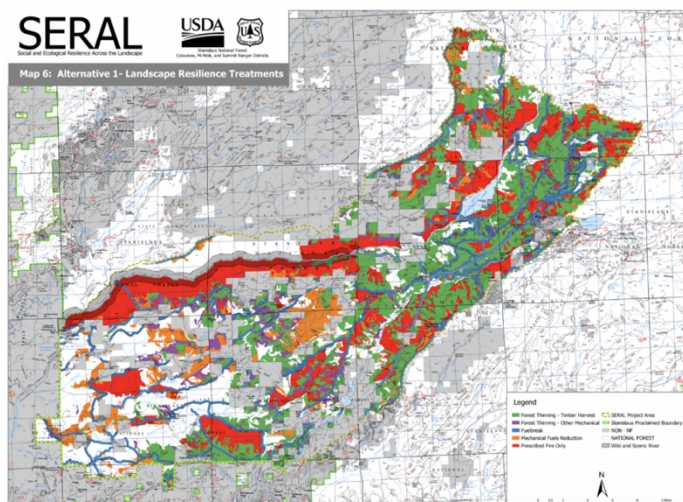
As shown in the map at left, the SERAL project will eventually create strategically placed fuelbreak strips along selected ridgelines or along roads to aid firefighters in suppressing wildfires. They will also serve as anchor points for doing broadcast burns during cool, safe times of the year. Those prescribed burns will help to consume decades of accumulated fallen logs, branches, forest litter, and other fuels that can stoke the intensity of summer season wildfires.

This first “final decision” was done separately from the other two portions of the SERAL project in order to speed up the fuelbreak work due to fire danger being so high in this third straight dry weather year.

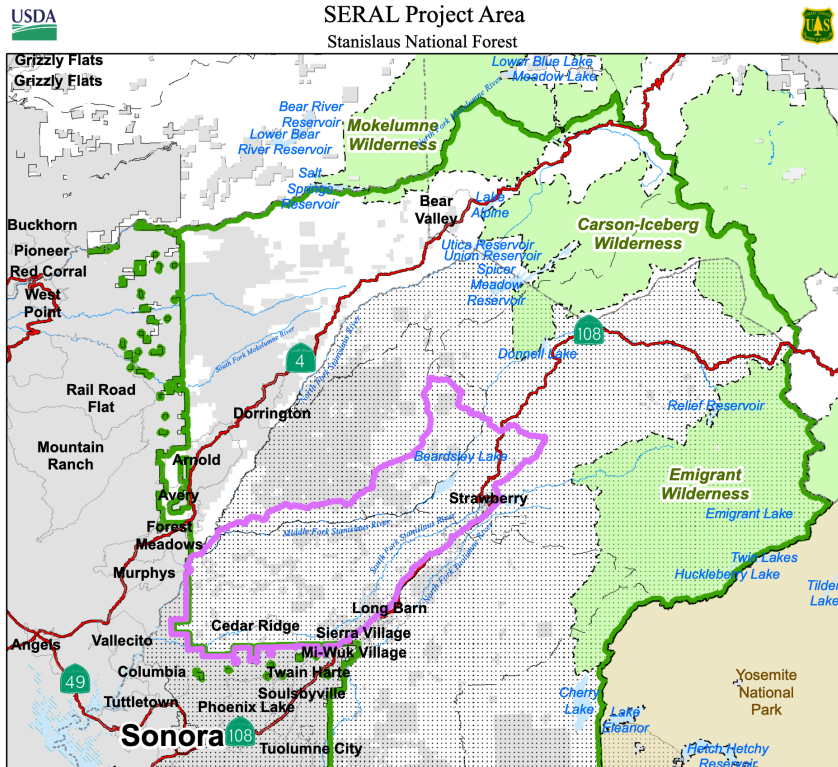
The vast majority of the SERAL project’s treatments were proposed as part of the original draft decision that Jason Kuiken released back on February 25th. In response to that main project plan, project critics have already filed “objections” – an appeal opposing some aspect of the thinning logging or biomass treatments or opposing the new Forest Service policies for the California Spotted Owl. The Regional Forester will judge whether those “objections” are valid, and then whether to modify parts of the main SERAL plan.

The third portion of the overall SERAL project is covered by a draft decision that was released on March 29th. That would allow the most controversial portions of the overall project – “condition-based” approvals that allow the Forest Service to take action at some point in the next few years if a wildfire burns or if widespread tree mortality occurs within the SERAL project boundary.

“Condition-based” means that no site-specific planning analysis would need to be done in the future if certain criteria is met that allows salvage logging, road work, or herbicide use. Approving a corrective treatment before a problem actually exists is one reason why condition-based planning is controversial.



SERAL is a key example of the “Go big!” planning approach promoted nationally by the Forest Service. Will it prove to be successful?



The purple boundary line shown at left encircles the vast SERAL project area in the Stanislaus River watershed. This is by far the largest “green forest” project ever planned for the Stanislaus Forest.

The location was chosen by the YSS forest stakeholder group as the top priority area in the local national forest. It’s an area that hasn’t burned recently, but it clearly has potential to suffer a devastating wildfire. It also contains many forested hillsides that lead up to “at risk” communities along the Highway 108 corridor. Those slopes need fuel reduction treatments.

This photo shows a fuels mastication project. A key part of the SERAL plan is to do thousands of acres of such treatments to open up dense forest stands to reduce the surface and ladder fuels that can feed high-severity wildfires. A diversity of plants thrive in thinned forests as more sunlight reaches the forest floor.



You may have never seen a ringtail – yet they can be found in widely scattered locations across the local region

Recently a charismatic ringtail cat got its picture taken at one of our CSERC wildlife camera stations in the national forest.

The ringtail is not a cat at all. They are actually members of the raccoon family. They can be recognized by their long black and white striped tail and small size (slightly smaller than a domestic cat). A ringtail's short, semi-retractable claws allow it to easily scamper up trees.

Although the ringtail cat is not especially uncommon, it's rare to see one due to their nocturnal sleep pattern and their general wariness toward humans.



However, ringtails haven't always been shy. Gold Rush miners shared stories of ringtail cats visiting their rustic Mother Lode cabins. Ringtails' diets usually consist of rats, mice, insects, fruits, and seeds. So as mice and rats began to invade miners' food storage, ringtails ventured closer to human dwellings to eat the rodents. They quickly found that human dwellings provided them shelter from predators and severe weather, as well as an abundance of food. Some miners began putting out boxes near their wood stoves to give the ringtails a place to sleep in the daytime.

A writer in 1942 recounted one spring when a ringtail gave birth to three-inch long ringtail cubs in close proximity to a tent near Crystal Caves. Accounts like these suggest tolerance or trust between the semi-wild, semi-domesticated ringtails and the humans they interacted with.



Although ringtails are no longer commonly seen around human residences, for a time they were tame enough to be referred to as "miners' cats".

Over the years the CSERC staff has been fortunate to get glimpses of ringtails in widely diverse areas. One was observed climbing on a rock ledge in the Tuolumne River canyon not far above the river. We've also seen one close to Twain Harte, scampering across the highway at dusk.

More frequently, we've gotten photos of them at our camera stations in scattered locations within the national forest - mostly below 6,000 in elevation. Perhaps you can share your own sightings with our staff to help us learn where ringtails can be found.

CSERC's new Conservation Director brings many skills and talents



Sometimes “getting more than you bargained for” can actually be a good thing.

It has been challenging to fill the Conservation Director position at CSERC due to the many complex (and often technical) environmental issues that we deal with and the need for a person who can juggle competing demands amidst often stressful pressures and looming deadlines.

We needed someone to help maintain CSERC's non-profit functions, assist with member outreach, speak at key meetings, lead our many advocacy efforts, participate in stakeholder groups, deal with the media, help do forest fieldwork and watchdog monitoring, organize our volunteer workdays, and do many other tasks – often simultaneously.

We also hoped to find someone with a solid familiarity with the Stanislaus National Forest, local wilderness areas, Yosemite Park, and many of the plants and wildlife of our vast region. We were fortunate to get all the above, and more.

One candidate caught our attention

Tatiana Altman shared her background as a camper, counselor, and program director during many summers she spent at a local high-country family camp. She described her love for hiking and backpacking in our mountain region and her desire to help protect its beauty for future generations.

She also shared her experience working on organic farms in Hawaii, California, and New Hampshire. Adding to that diversity of expertise, she described her work as a staff attorney assisting low-income clients in need of legal representation. We learned that Tatiana is a practicing attorney with a law degree from the UCLA School of Law. She has worked with administrative law, has represented local government agencies, and has familiarity with many of the environmental policy issues and environmental laws that pertain to CSERC's work.

It's probably true that Tatiana had us at “I spent summers camping,” but we are also grateful that she brings her enthusiasm and her legal and policy background to our multi-tasking staff.



Here's your playbook for all the changes at Yosemite Park this year

Critically needed restoration projects that were long delayed are now all overlapping timewise in Yosemite Park this year. That means potential for major traffic delays, limited campground slots, and the total closure of some popular destinations. **Here are the details:**

Day Use Reservations – Starting May 20th, you can only get into Yosemite Park between 6 a.m. and 4 p.m. if you have a day-use reservation. Get one at the [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) website. It's good for three days of entries. The reservation owner must be in the vehicle; each vehicle must have its own day use reservation.



THERE WILL BE CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS THROUGHOUT THE PARK

A new Valley Welcome Center – The Sport Shop building near the main parking area is being converted into a new Welcome Center. This will close some parking areas as construction proceeds.

Glacier Point and the Glacier Point Road – The entire length of Glacier Point Road will be closed all this year and likely until the fall of 2023. There will be no access to iconic Glacier Point and its overlook.

Tioga Pass Road – The Tioga Road will have ongoing rehabilitation and paving work during the busy season from Olmstead Point to two miles east of Tuolumne Meadows - potentially causing periodic traffic delays.

Bridalveil Fall – Again this year, the Bridalveil Fall parking area and restrooms will be closed to public access due to major reconstruction and a sewer line extension work. The site may possibly reopen by October.

Tuolumne Meadows Campground – This huge, popular campground will be closed for two years as major reconstruction and renovation work is done to restore and improve visitor services and utilities.

Crane Flat Campground – This campground will also be closed to the public until at least this fall in order to allow for rehabilitation and reconstruction work.

Mariposa Grove – Closed for repairs since storm-caused damage back in January 2021, the Grove is expected to reopen on Memorial Day weekend. The shuttle from the parking area is also planned to reopen.

A slightly different approach for inviting your support

In each CSERC quarterly newsletter for more than three decades we've shared ways that our staff makes a difference.

This time we simply assume you know what we do and already know whether our efforts matter.



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Donation: __\$30 __\$50 __\$100 __\$250 __\$500 __other (monthly giving option is available on website)

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So much to learn, plus opportunities for new adventures



In this spring newsletter, we share about an owl intruder that threatens a local native species. We explain why ringtails were widely referred to as “miners’ cats.” You can learn why the large landscape SERAL project has ended up with three different decisions by the Forest Service.

Perhaps you’ll want to visit some of the featured wildflower sites in the foothills of the region. We highlight three key areas.

Or you may want to pay close attention to the new requirements for visiting Yosemite Park and learn which areas may be most congested due to this year’s many construction projects. There is a lot to share. We hope you value the new information and enjoy the compelling photos.

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