

Drone-Sleuthing BC's Hidden Clearcuts

While talking “emergency protection,” BC was quietly approving permits for clearcut logging in critical spotted owl habitat.

Joe Foy

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Spotted Owl habitat being loaded onto a logging truck in the Hidden Creek drainage. Photo by Joe Foy

In November, a friend and I drove up the Coquihalla Highway on a special mission. We had a couple of bikes in the back of my pickup truck.

In early-morning gloom, we slid our bikes under a locked gate, gave thanks that the gravel road beyond appeared to be mostly snow free, and began to ride, with mixed feelings of hope and dread about what we might see at the end of our trip.

Why the drama? My friend and I knew stuff that most other people on the Coke that day didn't.

We knew that we were biking toward an intact forest in a rare roadless valley: the drainage for Hidden Creek, a tributary of

the upper Coquihalla River. We knew that the federal government had mapped this forest in its *Draft Amended Recovery Strategy for the Spotted Owl* – the most endangered bird species in Canada – and had designated the lower portion of the drainage as Potential Critical Habitat needed for the survival of the spotted owl in Canada.

And we knew that in May 2023, the BC government had approved several clearcuts in the Hidden Creek drainage.



A waterfall on Hidden Creek, with clearcuts behind the screen of trees. Photo Joe Foy.

BC's logging approval was shocking for many reasons. One was a letter from Environment Canada I had in my hands, dated February 2023, stating that the Honourable Steven Guilbeault, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, would be taking action very soon to protect the Spotted Owl's habitat.

The letter said, "Over 2500 hectares across their habitat ... have a high potential to be harvested over the next year... Although this area is relatively small compared with the overall size of Spotted Owl habitat in British Columbia, the impact of the loss of this habitat on the recovery of the species extends beyond the specific area where harvesting occurs. To fulfill his obligations, the Minister will be formally making the appropriate recommendation to the Governor in Council regarding an emergency order to protect the Spotted Owl from imminent threats to both its survival and recovery. Subject to Cabinet agendas, the Department anticipates that a recommendation could be made in early 2023."

But the minister did not take action in early 2023. He waited for many months. And then, in September, soon after he had finally made his recommendation for an emergency order to halt logging in Hidden Creek and other threatened areas of Spotted Owl habitat, [Cabinet declined to approve it](#).

All this knowledge weighed heavy on our minds as we cycled closer and closer to the Hidden Creek bridge. Would the owl habitat still be standing?

Finally we arrived. From the deck of the bridge, everything looked just fine. There was even an old growth cedar tree soaring up to the sky near one end of the span.



Logging in the Hidden Creek drainage. Photo by Joe Foy.

But then I launched my drone and sure enough, the horrible truth was soon revealed. Beyond the screen of trees near the bridge, massive clearcuts spread up both sides of Hidden Creek. Smoke spiralled into the air near a grapple yarder. A logging truck was being loaded up with critical Spotted Owl habitat, recently ripped from the mountainsides.

The hypocrisy of BC and Canada was hidden no more.

View Joe's brief [video](#) about what he found at Hidden Creek.

Joe Foy is the protected areas campaigner for the Wilderness Committee.

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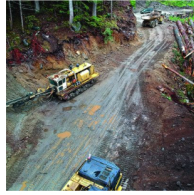
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