

# The Navy's Growler jets bring noise to a quiet place: Olympic National Park

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"THE SOUND OF FREEDOM" is a message known to all who drive past the entrance to Naval Air Station Whidbey, on Whidbey Island, but takes on a different meaning when Navy Growler jets fly over visitors enjoying the wildness and quiet which define Olympic National Park.

From campers in the Hoh rain forest to Lake Quinault Lodge guests, there is growing discontent that the sound of freedom is competing with solitude and silence in a crown jewel of America's national park system. The park draws those who want to hear bugling Roosevelt Elk, not Growler jets.

"The selling point of the park is silence, but then you hear a Navy Growler jet go overhead and you ask, 'What the hell?'" said Jason Bausher of Sequim, once an Eagle Scout in Aberdeen and later for 12 years a seasonal ranger in the park.

The noisy, Whidbey-based EA-18G Growler jets make 2,300 flights over the park each year, at fairly high elevation, coming to and going from two Olympic Military Operations Areas on the western peninsula. The planes are engaged in electronic warfare training. With 36 more Growler jets being added to the existing fleet of 82 at NAS Whidbey, the plan is for 5,000 jet flights each year.

"They ought to keep it (overflights) out of the park," said former Gov. Dan Evans, 94, who began exploring the Olympics as a Boy Scout at Camp Parsons. As a Republican U.S. Senator, he wrote legislation that gave most of Washington's three national parks protection as wilderness. Most of Olympic National Park is in the Daniel J. Evans Wilderness.

"It's highly unusual to use this territory for Growler jet flights," Evans said. "Gosh, people in this area are strongly pro-Navy, but the Navy should recognize this is a two-way street. Olympic is designated a wilderness park. It should stay like that."

Olympic National Park is unique. It is a World Heritage Site, an International Biosphere Reserve, the most visited national park in the Pacific Northwest and one of the 10 most visited in the United States. Its rain forests and coastline can be enjoyed year-round, drawing storm watchers in the winter.

NAS Whidbey is the Navy's home port for electronic warfare training.

The Navy is at Whidbey, and flies over the region, because Washington made the case for it to stay. We wanted the "Sound of Freedom" at least two decades ago.

When the federal Base Closure Commission was deciding its future in the late 1990s, advocates for the base cited spaces for training, opportunities to grow the air fleet, and public support. NAS Whidbey survived by a one-vote margin. Starting in 2008, however, its Prowler jets were replaced by far noisier Growlers.

"We have a unique mission. We're the only one that does it in the world," Cmdr. David Harris, commander of the Electronic Attack Squadron, told MyNorthwest earlier this month.

Seattle continues to welcome Growler jets each July, when the Navy's Blue Angels perform at the Seafair hydro races, and practice over the Emerald city.

In its decision document last spring, the Navy argued that adding 36 Growlers will, in its words, "provide Combatant Commanders with expanded electronic attack capability and support our national defense requirements." The Navy speaks repeatedly to its "mission" and the role electronic warfare played in NATO strikes that disabled the armed forces of Libya's dictator Col. Qaddafi in 2011.

The Navy at Whidbey has yielded just once. In the early 1990s, it halted aerial practice bombing runs on offshore rocks on the Olympic National Marine Sanctuary.

The EA-18G Growlers fly out to the western peninsula using a flight path that takes them directly over Lake Crescent and just north of Hurricane Ridge. They return by flying over the heart of the 922,000-acre national park, up over the north fork of the Quinault River, upper reaches of the Elwha River, and Deer Park.

"The jets are audible for four to five miles each way, which means almost the entirety of Olympic National Park," said Rob Smith, Northwest director of the National Parks Conservation Assn. He likens noise levels experienced in the Hoh Rain Forest, with a Growler overhead, to rush hour in downtown Seattle.

Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., is pressing an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act that would require ongoing, real-time noise monitoring --- not a study -- of the Growlers. They would be monitored near Coupeville, where the Growlers conduct touch-and-go landings, at the Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve, and over Olympic National Park.

Charts of visitor use in Olympic National Park tell a story. The "traffic" of back country hikers and campers declined in the 1990s, reflecting slowing down of the Baby Boomer generation. But lines on the charts started climbing back up again in the past five years.

The park has developed a cachet for its size and wildness, for night skies, for peace and for quiet. Lines snake down the corridor from the back country desk in Port Angeles, where Bausher used to give out containers to protect food from bears and instruct on cleaning up poop in God's great out-of-doors.

Gordon Hampton, a Port Townsend-based acoustic ecologist, has a theory of what's drawing people.

"Seattle is a technology city right now," he said. "A technology city is stress. A growing city is noise. Olympic National Park is a great antidote to the human consequences of work. It is a fantastic resource. Olympic National Park ranks as number one in acoustic diversity of all national parks."

Or in Dan Evans' words: "The Olympics, for me and thousands of others, has been a place to get off or get to the end of the road. Noise is exactly what we want to get away from. No unnatural noises!"

Olympic National Park has, for years, been fiercely defended. If the Navy has any questions, it ought to pick up a copy of Carsten Lien's history Olympic Battleground.

The timber industry fought to take Bogachiel and Calawah rainforest valleys out of the park almost from the time Franklin D. Roosevelt put them in. It was thwarted. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Willaim O. Douglas twice led hikes along Olympic Park beaches in protest of a proposed road that would spoil the wilderness. It was never built.

"They could certainly do this somewhere else," said Rob Smith. The National Parks Conservation Assn. has suggested Mountain Home AFB in Idaho, or Nellis AFB in Nevada as other places for electronic warfare training. The Navy has countered that using Mountain Home would add \$5 million in costs each year, and that the Idaho base is an hour's flight time away. (Cost of a Growler: \$90 million.)

Dan Evans has another suggestion: Go around the national park, say, by using the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

"It would be a minor inconvenience for the Navy to avoid the heart of the park," said the namesake of its wilderness. "There is a relatively easy result that would generate good will for the Navy."