

News from the Watershed

Flight of the Fish Hawk

Ospreys, often called Fish Hawks or Sea Hawks, are sometimes seen soaring on the wind currents, but most of their flight is active with their wings flapping. The scientific name for the osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, is derived from the mythical king of Athens, *Pandion*, whose daughters were turned into birds, and the Greek words *halos*, which refers to the sea, and *aetos*, meaning an eagle.

Surely the osprey is among the most exceptional of the birds of prey. With its distinct white head and black cheek patch, dark upper body and white-lined wings, this raptor is truly a beautiful sight.

Ospreys can be found throughout the world near bodies of water such as lakes, rivers and seacoasts. This is because they are well equipped for catching fish, the mainstay of their diet.

The beautiful hawk will soar above the water and then hover until a fish nears the surface. Using its sharp, piercing talons, it will then spear the fish, plunging into the water feet first, sometimes from altitudes of 50 – 150 feet. While balancing with its huge wings, it once again lifts its large body off into the sky. The barbs on the bottom of the feet, called spicules, aid in holding their slippery prey. Ospreys require one to three fish per day to survive. A father osprey, who must fish for 2-3 babies and a mate, has to catch six to eight fish a day.

Ospreys are unique creatures; they have a wing span of 4 ½ to 6 feet and their contrasting white and dark coloration makes them easy to identify. These magnificent creatures usually fly with a crook in their wings and scream out sharp whistles and chirping sounds. One of the features of the osprey that distinguishes it from other birds of prey is their opposable toe. While perched, ospreys usually have three toes in front and one in the back, but when catching a fish, the feet are positioned with two toes on either side of the fish. These birds are able to position the fish face forward for a streamlined flight.

Florida ospreys stay in Florida year round and lay their eggs between December and February. Generally, these birds will nest in a tree, rocks or even on a telephone pole. The female lays two to four eggs which are incubated for 35 - 40 days. The nest is made up of sticks and other forest debris. However, such odd items as hula hoops, rag dolls, and toy boats have been found in osprey nests.

The male aids in raising the nestlings and many times can be seen returning to the nest with dinner. Ospreys are said to pair for life. The survivor will seek another mate only if the couple should be broken up because of death. However, there is an exception to this, if mating proves unsuccessful, the female will “divorce” her mate and find another.

Fortunately, the osprey has made a comeback. In the 70’s and 80’s, ospreys faced possible extinction in some areas. The species could not produce enough young to keep maintain their population. DDT, a pesticide that was heavily used prior to the 1970’s is blamed for their past peril. When DDT is released into the water source, the fish soak up the chemical. The osprey eats the fish and it causes problems with the eggs that it lays. The chemical is said to make the egg shell so thin, that when the mother sits on it, the egg will crack. DDT was banned in many countries in the 70’s and since that time the osprey has made significant progress.

Unfortunately, the osprey still faces many challenges. Since the hawk lives primarily on fish, the use of too much fertilizer and other pollutants that run off into the water, can reduce the amount of fish, thereby, causing the osprey a shortage of food. In addition, ospreys enjoy nesting in dead trees. When these trees are removed, it causes a shortage of nesting sites. In addition, often times fishing line is left near the water and the osprey may get tangled in the line.

Many organizations and citizens have taken the initiative to assist these beautiful birds by building nesting platforms for them to raise their young. Ospreys are very adaptable and it is not an unusual sight to see nests atop telephone poles, towers and other tall man-made structures.

There are other ways in which citizens can assist these extraordinary birds of prey. When fertilizing or applying pesticides, make sure to read the instructions and don't use too much. The excess goes into the ground and eventually ends up in the lakes and other water bodies that ospreys depend on for their food source. Make sure that when fishing, the fishing line isn't left behind for them to get tangled in. These small steps can go a long way in continuing with the successful comeback of these magnificent birds.