



Osprey



The osprey is also widely known as the “fish hawk” because its diet consists primarily of fish.

The osprey (*Pandion haliaetus* or “sea eagle”) is a large bird of prey well known for its spectacular feeding behavior and distinctive plumage. With a wing spread of up to 6 feet, ospreys are often distinguished in the air by their white under parts, dark “elbow” patch, and arched wings. They feed almost exclusively on fish, patrolling lakes, rivers, and seacoasts for their prey. When a fish is sighted, the osprey plunges into the water, sometimes totally submerging itself, to grasp the fish with its sharp, spiny talons and reversible toe. With catch in tow, the bird flies off to a favored perch to feed.

Habitat and Range

Ospreys live along rivers, lakes, seacoasts, and bays. They are seen on every continent except Antarctica.

Feeding Habits

Fish are the main food source of osprey, but they will occasionally catch and eat small birds and rodents. They have also been known to catch snakes and frogs. When living on or near rivers and lakes, osprey will perch in a tree overlooking the water to scan for fish, occasionally flying out over the water. On the coasts, ospreys often spend more time flying over the water, since there are fewer suitable perches. When an osprey spots a fish, it hovers in the air for a few seconds and dives, wings held above its back, into the water and grabs the fish with its talons. Many ospreys have a favorite perch on which to consume their meal.

Nesting

Ospreys will nest either in small colonies or alone. They usually build their nests high in dead or dying trees. With development of the coasts, osprey have taken residence in anything thin and tall such as radio antennas, water towers, old utility poles, and even smokestacks. Many sanctuaries have osprey nesting poles. When ospreys are successful with a nest, they will build it up each year with sticks after which some nests can weigh up to half a ton.



A nesting platform placed in a dead tree or on a utility pole can help attract ospreys to your property, provided it has suitable habitat to support them.

The female, which is larger than the male, lays two to four white, pink, or cinnamon colored, blotched eggs. The male brings food to the female while she incubates the eggs for 32-48 days.

Conservation

Though once commonly sighted along waterways throughout the country, osprey populations declined drastically in the 1960s and 70s. The cause was a combination of habitat loss and pesticide contamination. Lakes and streams polluted with DDT and other chlorinated hydrocarbons used on agricultural fields led to the contamination of fish upon which the osprey feed. As the osprey consumed the contaminated fish, these chemicals affected their ability to successfully reproduce; they laid thin-shelled eggs that broke when sat upon.

Since the 1972 ban on the sale of DDT in this country, osprey populations have been making a gradual comeback. Habitat loss, especially in coastal areas, is still an issue. Fortunately, many people have become involved in helping the osprey find suitable nesting sites. Osprey platforms, 20-30 foot poles with a three foot square platform at the top, have been erected near marshes, lakes, and coastal areas. These towers have successfully attracted ospreys that build their nest of sticks, seaweed, and driftwood on the platform.

Attracting and Supporting Osprey

1. Property Evaluation

The first step in encouraging and supporting ospreys is to evaluate the land and water on your property to determine if you are located in suitable habitat. Ospreys usually choose nest sites near or over water, along rivers, lakes, and coastal areas. Evaluate water quality. Are fish populations healthy and in sufficient numbers to support ospreys? If you have seen ospreys in the area, your chances of attracting them to nest are good.

2. Placement of Platform

Place the nesting platform in a location that offers some privacy for the birds. Areas of heavy human use or traffic are not advised. Platforms should be located near shallow, clear water when possible. Ospreys like to have a clear view in all directions from the platform. Platforms should not be located adjacent to wooded trees that will overtop the platform. However, scattered trees near the platform will provide perching sites for the osprey. Place several 1-2 foot long dead sticks on the platform when it is erected. This nesting material may encourage osprey to use the platform. Avoid placing the platform near electrical lines that may be a hazard to the birds.

3. Time of Placement

The best time of year to place a platform is the fall. In Florida, nesting takes place from December through April. In temperate parts of the U.S. and Canada, nesting is from April through June.

Since the osprey is still listed as a “threatened” species in many states, we suggest that you contact your local department of non-game wildlife before erecting a platform. Many state agencies have staff that can assist in placing a platform and monitoring osprey activity. Linking up with local experts will also allow your efforts to become part of a coordinated attempt to increase osprey populations in their historical breeding range.

Helpful Web Sites

<http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/id/framlst/i3640id.html>

http://www.nhaidubon.org/research/about_ospreys.htm

e-Source

Visit our online information center for fact sheets on a variety of environmental topics:

www.auduboninternational.org/e-source

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