

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus* or “sea eagle”) FACT SHEET

Ospreys, also known as Fish Hawks, are found on every continent except for Antarctica. These large birds gained recognition during the 1950s-1970s when a population crash occurred as a result of high levels of contaminants (mainly DDT and its components) which caused severe eggshell thinning. Studies of the devastation in the Osprey population provided key evidence in court to help block the use of the detrimental pesticides and in doing so allowed recovery of this species population. Another gain in population resulted with the use of man-made nesting sites. Habitat loss in coastal areas still remains a problem. Florida considers the Osprey a species of special concern and permits must be obtained in order to move or remove a nest. If a permit is granted a replacement structure must be erected to mitigate the removal of the original nest.



PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Adults - Large raptor with a white breast and belly, black back and wings. The wings are long with wingtips angled slightly backwards. The eyes have a dark eye stripe and the crown and forehead are white. Osprey are often confused with the American Bald Eagle. The typical lifespan is 7–10 years, though rarely individuals can grow to as old as 20–25 years

Juveniles – similar look, but with whitish scaling on back feathers and fewer chest markings. The eyes are orange.

DIET

Osprey are excellent anglers with eyes adapted to see below the water’s surface and will hover 30-130ft above to locate their prey then dive feet first entering the water to obtain their meal of fish. 99% of the Ospreys diet is fish. The other 1% consists of small rodents, birds, snakes and frogs. Osprey will fish both salt and fresh water habitats. Their specialized talons aid the bird in catching and holding onto their prey, and if you watch closely you will see the Osprey always carries the fish head forward.



NESTING BEHAVIOR AND NEST BUILDING

Osprey will nest either in small colonies or alone and will most always mate for life. They will return year after year to the same nest sight which are generally built high in dead trees (snags), but have been known to take up residence within lighting fixtures in large stadiums, radio antennas, water towers, old utility poles and even smokestacks. More and more municipalities and neighborhoods are erecting man made nest platforms to attract Osprey. With each passing year the nests get larger and can weigh well over a half ton. Nesting in Florida takes place from December through April.

INCUBATION

The female lays one egg every day or every other day until she has laid two to four eggs. The male and female both incubate the eggs, which hatch after about 40 days. Because the eggs are laid one or two days apart, they also hatch one or two days apart. Chicks that hatch first are bigger than the other chicks and are usually dominant over the smaller chicks. If the parents cannot provide enough food for all of the chicks in the nest, the smallest chicks will not survive due to lack of proper nourishment. This is called brood reduction.

NESTLING CARE

When Osprey chicks hatch, they are covered in white down with brown streaks on the face, back, and wings and they weigh only about 2 ounces. When the chicks are 10 days old, the white down is replaced by charcoal-colored down. Chicks begin to grow feathers at approximately two weeks old and will begin to fledge when they are 48 to 76 days old. Once they can fly, the chicks will begin to hunt for themselves, though they usually also take food from their parents until they are able to catch enough fish to feed themselves.



Male and female Osprey both care for their young. They feed the chicks and protect them from predators and cool, wet weather. The male is the sole provider of all fish for the chicks before they can fly. This means that males have to catch up to 10 fish each day for the female and the chicks. The parents tear the fish into small pieces for the chicks to eat. Osprey parents hunt fish for their chicks until the chicks can survive on their own which is usually two to eight weeks after they begin flying.

During the first few weeks after hatching, osprey chicks are not able to control their body temperature very well. The female parent broods the chicks frequently for the first two weeks and during very hot or cool weather until they are about four weeks old. Both parents spend a lot of time protecting the nest from other Ospreys and potential predators.

SHADOW WOOD'S INITIATIVE

In July of 2011 Shadow Wood Community Association erected a 25 foot platform in the Preserve Boardwalk area to attract a breeding pair and add dimension to the Audubon International's Green Neighborhood initiative. This platform was placed in an area known for Osprey activity.

Osprey can be a valuable indicator species for monitoring the health of ponds, streams, rivers, bays and estuaries. If water is polluted, the pollutants will be found in the fish that the Osprey consumes. Since Osprey are sensitive to many of these pollutants, the health of the Osprey can tell us about the health of the aquatic ecosystem where they live.

Information Provided by: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)
Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online:
<http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/683>
Audubon International

For more information visit these sites:

<http://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/profiles/birds/raptors-and-vultures/osprey/>
<http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/osprey/id>

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