



Osprey

Pandion haliaetus

The osprey is perhaps our most easily observed bird of prey, at least in summer. Its large, conspicuous nests can be seen on dead trees along waterways and on channel markers in coastal areas. Its habit of nesting on man-made structures shows that this raptor can coexist with humans and even benefit from some of our activities.

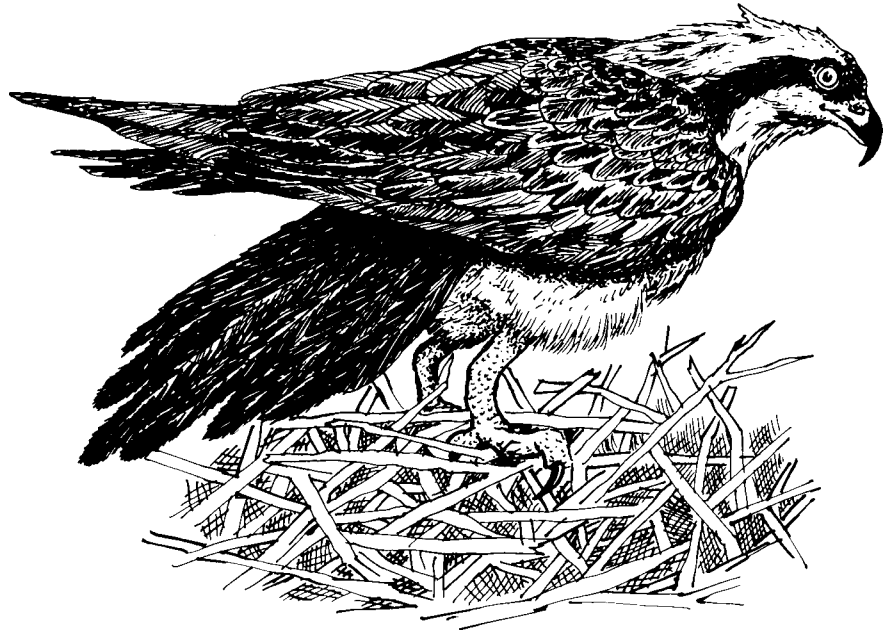
The osprey is the sole member of its taxonomic family and can be found over most of the Northern Hemisphere and in Australia. It is probably most closely related to the kites. It feeds almost exclusively on fish, earning the common name of “fish hawk.”

History and Status

During the 1960s, osprey populations were at an all-time low. As with many species of raptors, pesticides such as DDT caused eggshell thinning or adult sterility and numbers of birds declined rapidly. The effects on osprey populations were pronounced because they feed on fish that readily store persistent pesticides and therefore contain high levels of pesticide residues. However, since the use of persistent pesticides has been banned or strictly controlled, osprey populations have made a remarkable comeback. Ospreys are again common residents of coastal areas and can regularly be seen in other parts of the state during fall and spring migrations.

Description

Ospreys are large birds, standing 21 to 24 inches tall and hav-



ing a wing span of up to approximately 6 feet. They are dark brown above and white below. The head is white with dark speckles on the crown and a dark brown line through the eye and on the side of the face. The osprey flies with wings arched and a black spot is apparent at the bend of each wing. It is the only raptor that actually plunges into the water, entering feet first to catch fish with its talons. The soles of the feet have sharp, spiny projections, an adaptation that allows a firm grip on slippery fish.

Habitat and Habits

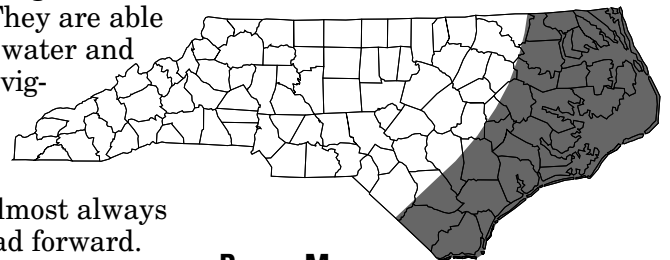
The osprey is almost always seen near water that contains an abundant fish population. Ospreys are excellent hunters of fish. They usually hover over the water until a fish nears the surface and then dive feet first, grasping the fish with their talons. They are able to take off from the water and can be seen shaking vigorously to remove water after they are airborne.

Captured fish are almost always carried with the head forward. Although they are almost exclusively fish eaters, ospreys have to

take other prey including turtles, birds and mice.

Ospreys build large, bulky nests of sticks in dead trees, on stumps, or on man-made structures such as channel markers. Several pairs may nest in close proximity, indicating that they may prefer to nest in loose colonies. They return to the same nest, usually in early March of each year, and repair and enlarge it by adding more sticks.

The female lays two to four buff-colored eggs with reddish-brown splotches, and incubation lasts for four to five weeks. The female does most of the incubation but is relieved by the male when she leaves the nest to feed. The young remain in the nest for about eight weeks after hatching. After migrating in the fall, the young remain south on the win-



Range Map:

Occupied range ■

**WILD
Facts**

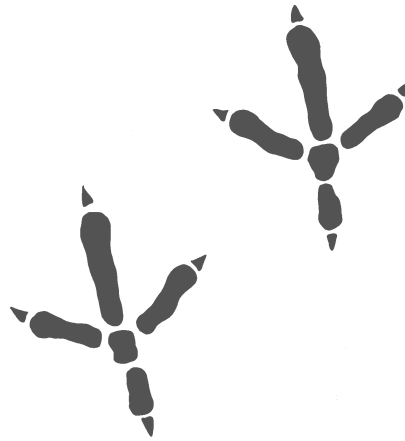
tering grounds until they are two years old. At that time they again migrate north. They normally start breeding at about three years of age.

Range and Distribution

Ospreys are found throughout North America during the breeding season. They are most numerous in Florida, along the Atlantic Coast, and on the Great Lakes. In North Carolina, the osprey is a spring and summer resident of the estuaries, lakes and rivers of the Coastal Plain where it nests and raises its young. It is often seen near lakes and rivers inland to the mountains, especially during migration. Except for a few that spend the winter on the Gulf Coast of the United States, North American ospreys spend the winter in the Caribbean, Central America or northern South America. The South Florida population is nonmigratory.

People Interactions

Human activities have greatly affected osprey populations in the past through the indiscriminate use of persistent pesticides. After the ban on DDT and similar pesticides, populations rebounded and are healthy at present. Because of its sensitivity to contaminants in the environment and the ease with which it can be observed and monitored, the osprey can serve as an excellent indicator of the health of the environment. It has adapted well to living with man, but continued pollution and destruction of habitat could have an adverse impact in the future.



References

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- Potter, Eloise F., James F. Parnell and Robert P. Teulings. *Birds of the Carolinas* (Chapel Hill, 1980).
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Credits

- Written by Tom Henson.
Illustrated by J.T. Newman.
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OSPREY

Classification:

Class: Aves

Order: Falconiformes

Average Size:

Length: 21 to 24 in.

Wingspan: 59 to 72 in.

Weight: 2.2 to 3.9 pounds.

Females are somewhat larger than males.

Food:

Fish

Breeding:

Monogamous. Breeding season early March to May. The incubation period for the 2 to 4 eggs is 4 to 5 weeks.

Young:

Called chick or eyas. Remain in nest until 8 weeks of age when they fledge. Young reach sexual maturity in three years.

Life Expectancy

Longer than 10 years.