



Osprey Facts



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Identification

The osprey is a large hawk. White undersides and a hook in its narrow wings identify this bird as it soars above the water. Adults are dark brown above with brownish-black marks on the wings and brown speckling on the breast. The head is white with a dark brown crown and brown streak down the cheek. The female is typically larger than the male.

At 18 months, osprey achieve their full adult plumage. Juvenile osprey resemble the adults, but have buff-tipped feathers on the back of their upper body, giving them a speckled appearance, and the streaking on the breast tends to be heavier. As juvenile osprey mature, their eye color changes from brown to yellow.

Life History

Osprey feed primarily on live fish, which they catch from the water by using their long, hooked talons. An osprey can plunge so forcefully into the water that it will completely submerge! When carrying their prey back to the nest, osprey will arrange the fish so that it is facing upright, head forward. Occasionally, an osprey will catch and eat a snake, eel, or even a frog.



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The female osprey lays one to four, but usually three, eggs in the spring in a large nest made of mostly sticks. Osprey construct their nests at the tops of dead trees, atop power poles, on man-made nesting platforms, and sometimes on buoys, chimneys, or other structures. The nests are most often used year after year and can become up to 10 feet high as more nesting materials are added each breeding season.

Osprey typically lay eggs in April or May. The female incubates them for about a month, all the while fiercely protecting the nest with her mate. During incubation, the male will defend the nest and do the hunting, bringing food back to the nest for the female.

Sixty days after hatching, young osprey make their first flight! After fledging, the young remain with their parents for up to two months, and then remain at their wintering grounds for two to three years until they return north to make their first attempt at breeding.



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Range

The osprey is found on every continent except Antarctica. In North America, they nest along the coasts and large inland lakes. Nesting along rivers is increasing. Osprey overwinter from Florida to Mexico and even into South America.

Status

The dramatic decline of the osprey populations between the 1940s and 1970 was caused by DDT-induced eggshell thinning, which reduced the number of eggs hatching live chicks successfully. From an estimated 1,000 active nests in the 1940s between New York City and Boston, to about 150 nests in 1969, the breeding population of osprey suffered the same fate as that of the Bald eagle.

Since the ban of DDT in New York in 1971, and in the rest of the country in 1972, the osprey population has made a comeback. In 1983, the osprey was down graded to Threatened from its 1976 listing as Endangered, and in 1999, it was down graded again to a Species of Special Concern.

Breeding pairs on Long Island, the Adirondacks, and Central New York offer several opportunities to view these amazing birds!



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Interesting Facts

- Young osprey make their first migration alone, instinctively knowing where to go without following their parents.
- Osprey return not only to their same breeding area each year, but also to their same wintering grounds.
- Osprey are great anglers—successful in one out of four dives for fish!
- Bald eagles and Great black-backed gulls chase osprey, forcing them to drop their prey; eagles sometimes catch the stolen prey mid-air.

