

NATURE DETECTIVES

Osprey, That's What!

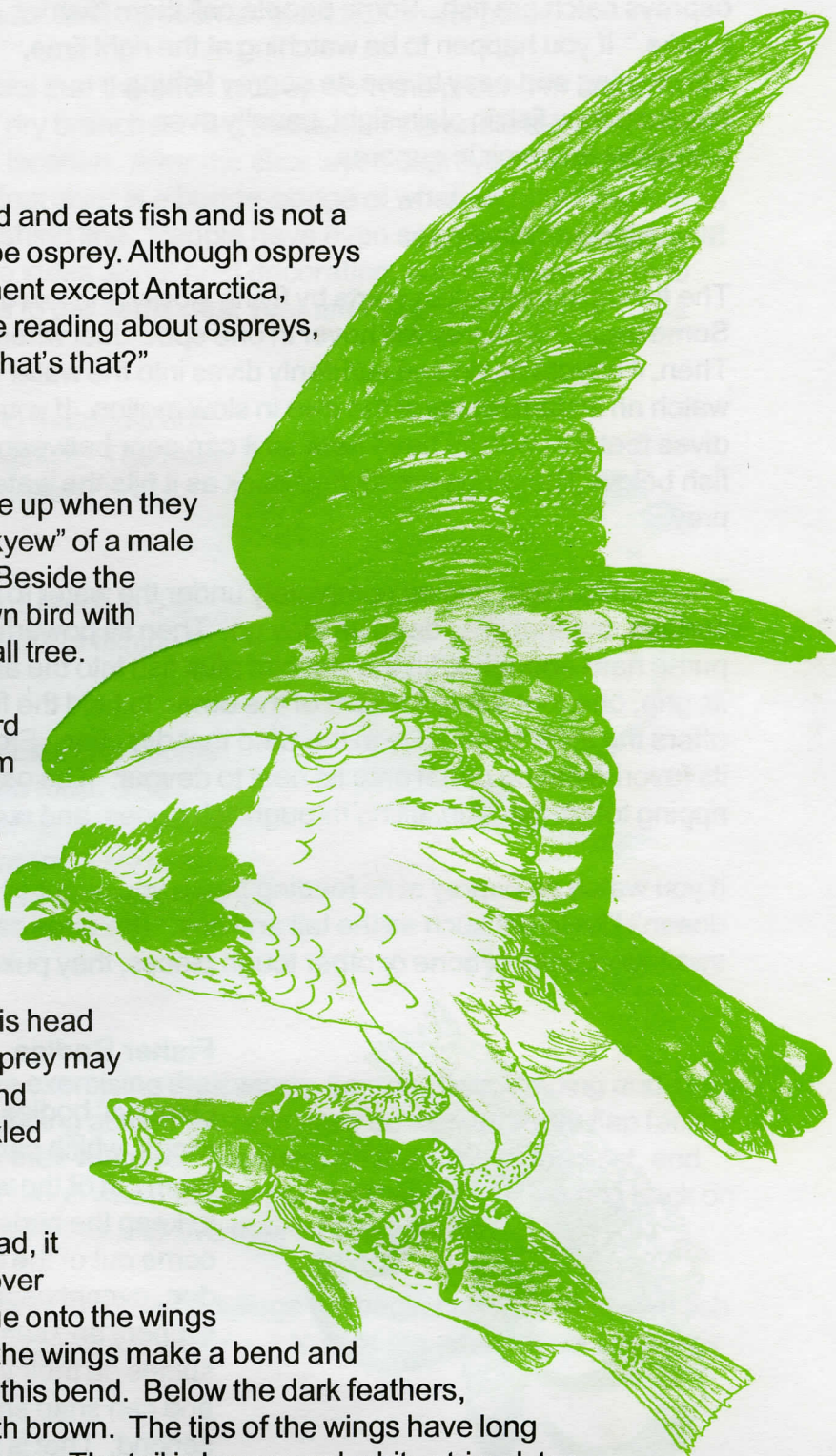
What hawk-like bird has a white head and eats fish and is not a bald eagle? The answer could only be osprey. Although ospreys live all over the world, on every continent except Antarctica, chances are if you tell people you are reading about ospreys, (*Pandion haliaetus*) they will ask, "What's that?"

Listen, Look, Identify

People walking in Legion Park glance up when they hear the slow whistled "kyew, kyew, kyew" of a male osprey sounding across the water. Beside the reservoir, they see a large dark-brown bird with a smallish white head perched in a tall tree.

With a closer look, they notice the bird has a black-brown stripe running from his brown back to his beak and a round yellow eye set within the stripe close to each side of the beak. A dazzling white breast sets the bird off from his surroundings. If there is a breeze blowing on the perched osprey, the feathers on the back of his head may stick out in a crest. A female osprey may be perched nearby. She is bigger and likely has a necklace of brown speckled feathers decorating her snowy front.

Even if the osprey is soaring overhead, it is easy to identify. White feathers cover the underside of the bird and continue onto the wings in a wide "V." At the ends of the "V" the wings make a bend and there is a splotch of dark feathers at this bend. Below the dark feathers, the wings are striped or speckled with brown. The tips of the wings have long brown feathers spread apart like fingers. The tail is brown-and-white striped, too.



Fish Hawks

The word "osprey" comes from words in a long-ago language that meant "bird of prey." A bird of prey is a bird that catches and eats other animals, and what ospreys catch are fish. Some people call them "fish hawks." If you happen to be watching at the right time, it is exciting and easy to see an osprey fishing because they fish in plain sight, usually over a shallow reservoir in our area.



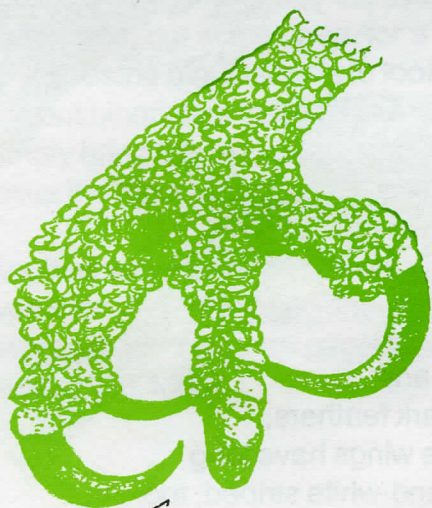
OSPREY NEST

Sky-diving for Fish

The fishing osprey often starts by flying slowly and low over the water looking for fish. Sometimes the osprey will hover in one spot. Just when you think the bird will dive, it flies on. Then, it hovers again and suddenly dives into the water with a splash. You wish you could watch an instant replay of the dive in slow motion. If you could, you'd notice that the osprey dives feet first with its head bent so it can peer between its toes to aim its dive directly over the fish below. The wings are tucked back as it hits the water, and its talons are ready to grasp its prey.

The osprey might end up completely under the water to catch a fish three feet below the surface, but that is as deep as they go. Then its powerful wings reach high out of the water to pump hard enough to lift the wet bird plus fish into the air. Once it's in the air, the osprey shifts its grip, one foot a little forward of the other, to hold the fish in a straight line. The fish's body offers the least resistance to the wind that direction. From there the osprey will take the fish to its favorite eating perch or to its nest to devour. The osprey's curved beak is perfect for ripping tough fish skin, biting through fish bones, and pulling off chunks of meat.

If you watch an osprey at its feeding perch you might see it pull off and drop parts of the fish it doesn't like to eat such as the tail and fins. The birds can digest most of the fish, but if they swallow chunks of bone or other tough pieces, they puke them up in pellets like owl pellets.



TALON

Fisher Bodies

Ospreys' bodies are built for fishing. Their big strong wings, which can measure six feet from tip to tip, power them out of the water. Their feathers are oily and thick to keep the birds warm and dry. Sometimes when they come out of the lake, they shake off the water like a dog, except ospreys shake off while flying! Fish are slippery and can swim fast so ospreys have short sharp spines on their toes for gripping. Their talons are long and can snap shut on a fleeing fish in 2/100th of a second. That is faster than you can say, "swim!"

No Brotherly Love Among Nestlings

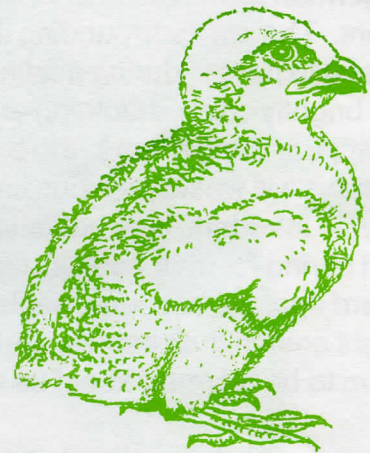
The best thing about osprey nests is they are huge and built in the open near water where it is easy to watch the nesting activities. The nests are usually placed on a big old, flat-topped tree like a ponderosa pine. Platforms built for osprey nests are readily accepted by the birds, too. Unfortunately so are places dangerous for nesting such as electrical power poles.

The nests are constructed from big sticks that the birds pick up from the ground or break from trees by landing hard and snapping off dry branches. Big sticks hold the nests together when stormy weather buffets their high open location. After the stick layer, ospreys add a layer of softer material such as grasses. The final layer is a hodge-podge of what we might think of as garbage, things like plastic bags and fishing line. People have even seen dolls and old shirts in osprey nests. Ospreys have strange ideas about nest decorating, but they sure seem to like their nests. The osprey pair returns to the same nest year after year, adding new sticks and redecorating.

The male birds bring most of the nesting materials and the females spend the most time arranging it. The male also brings fish to the female, but if he doesn't bring enough, she has to catch her own.

She will lay 2-4 eggs, typically. The eggs hatch in 5-6 weeks. Once they hatch, the male has lots of fishing to do to supply food to the growing family.

By the time they are 10 days old, the babies can shuffle across the nest to the parent bird to grab food. The bigger nestlings shove their smaller brothers and sisters aside to get to the food first. The babies back up to the rim of the nest to poop over the sides, which keeps the nest clean.



NESTLING

Fledglings

Forty-day-old babies spend a lot of time exercising their wings, flapping and flapping and jumping. After about 10 days of hop-flapping across the nest, they do an exuberant flap facing the breeze and the wind catches under their wings, or they jump off the edge of the nest, and they are suddenly flying. Flying isn't so tough when you've got great wings, but landing back on the nest is definitely shaky at first until the birds improve their landing skills.

Fishing skills are even harder to learn though some fledglings will begin catching their own fish with just two or three days of practice. Parent birds continue to feed the young fliers from their catches for at least ten to twenty days.

Farewell Summer, Good-bye Ospreys

With late summer's shorter days and a chilly nip in the air, area ospreys soon start on their amazingly long, twice-a-year journey. They arrived in Colorado in late March or early April after flying thousands of miles from Central America. With the babies grown up, it is time to reverse the journey. Instinctively, they know they can't fish where water freezes over in the winter. The parents usually leave first, and by late September the ospreys will have headed south. Next spring the parents will return to the same nest site. If one of the parent birds dies before the return, the remaining bird will return to the nest and choose a new mate to repair the old nest and raise a new brood. The babies stay in Central America their first year. They won't make the long return journey until spring of their second year.

Seeing Ospreys Far Away Up Close

An osprey pair has nested on a platform at Lagerman Reservoir in Boulder County for ten years. The area surrounding the platform is closed to people during nesting season because our brightly colored clothing and loud voices make us appear dangerous to the birds. The parent ospreys will waste precious time warning off human intruders, time better spent fishing, eating, and caring for their babies. Ospreys have to guard against raccoons, eagles, and owls that might snatch their babies. But, we don't want them to be alarmed about us so we stay back.

To really see the nest and observe the ospreys, you need to use binoculars.

Ospreys make good practice for beginning binocular users because the birds stay in the same spot, out in the open, for a long time. One trick to using binoculars is to look at the osprey without binoculars then without moving your head, simply bring the binoculars to your eyes. Then, focus the binoculars.

Another way to see an osprey up close is with a web cam. Try <http://www.friendsofblackwater.org/osprey.html>. This web page has a recorded osprey call, too.

