

# WILDLIFE DIVERSITY NOTEBOOK: Osprey

**Common Name:** Osprey

**Scientific Name:** *Pandion haliaetus*

**Status:** The osprey is a relatively common raptor, especially along the coasts and large rivers. They are found on every continent except Antarctica. The range of the osprey is expanding in the United States due in part to translocation projects.

**West Virginia Status:** Historically, nesting osprey were very rare because of a lack of habitat. Only six definite nesting records exist between 1894 and 1975. However, man-made lakes have created more suitable habitat. A translocation project in the 1980s and 1990s boosted the number of nesting pairs in West Virginia. Recent nests have been documented in Berkeley, Jefferson, Lewis, Mason, Tyler and Wood counties. Osprey are common during migration in the spring and fall, especially near bodies of water.

**Description:** Body length of the osprey is 21-24 inches and its wingspan measures 54-72 inches, almost eagle size. The weight of males



Kirk Pletcher

*These three young osprey hatched high above Stonewall Jackson Lake on a 20-foot nesting platform erected as part of a multi-agency project to monitor ospreys.*

ranges from 2.6 to 3.5 pounds while females weigh from 2.6 to 4.2 pounds. The sexes are outwardly similar. The wings are dark brown above with a purplish gloss, and clear white below. The breast is somewhat spotted or streaked with brown. The head is mainly white with a broad black mark through the cheek and eye. The sides of the neck, bill and talons are black. While soaring the wings are distinctly bent at the wrists with a large black patch visible at the bend.

The body is distinguished by white underparts. The tail is fairly long with narrow dark bands.

**Range:** The osprey is found in Europe south to Spain, Asia, northern Africa, southern China, the East Indies, Australia, North America, South America and some of the Southwest Pacific Islands. In North America,

osprey are present in the summer months while nesting and spend the winter months in the southern United States, Mexico, and South and Central America.

**Habitat:** Osprey need large, permanent bodies of clean water with abundant fish populations. Historically, osprey were confined to coastal areas and large river systems. West Virginia rivers probably fluctuated in water level too much to attract nesting osprey. Flood control structures on our large rivers, however, have created excellent osprey habitat. Adults usually construct nests over water in dead trees or use man-made structures. The same pair uses a nest year after year and even the pair's offspring may use the nest.

**Life History:** Osprey usually begin returning to West Virginia in late April. First-time pairs will build a nest while established pairs usually add sticks to an old nest. Adults



Scott Buttenworth

*An adult osprey*

make nests of sticks, aquatic vegetation, drift wood, corn stalks or any other material they can gather. They usually lay two to four eggs. Both parents help in incubation which begins after the first egg is laid. Hatching generally occurs 32 to 33 days after incubation begins. Usually the female stays at the nest to feed and protect the young while the male hunts for prey. Young birds first try to fly when 51 to 59 days old. The adults feed the young until they can fend for themselves. Migration to the tropics begins in early August. Young osprey will stay in the tropics for two to three years before returning north to breed. Only one in three young will survive to adult age; however, once they become adults, osprey can live for over 20 years.

**Diet:** Osprey feed almost exclusively on fish. They prefer slow-moving species that swim close to the water's surface such as suckers, bowfin, catfish, shad and carp. Infrequently an osprey tries to catch too big a fish and drowns from being pulled under the water. Osprey usually perch in a tree near water and then fly above the water's surface searching for a fish. Once a fish is spotted, the osprey dives feet first into the water to try and catch the fish. The lower surface of the feet are covered with small pads called spicules, that help osprey hold fish. If a fish is caught, the bird will fly up into the air, shake the

water from its wings, and then reposition the fish so that the head faces forward to reduce drag while flying. Osprey can catch and carry fish weighing more than four pounds.

**Threats And Prospects:** More than 20 years ago, the DNR embarked on a successful osprey release program that lasted 11 years. It was conducted at three sites in the state: near Romney on the South Branch River in cooperation with the Potomac Valley Audubon Society; Tygart Lake Dam near Grafton

in cooperation with the Pittsburgh District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; and the Ohio River at Blennerhassett Island in cooperation with Dupont Washington Works Wildlife Enhancement Committee. Young osprey were obtained from nests in Virginia and Maryland. Because of the release program

and natural increases in osprey populations, the future looks bright for increased nesting in West Virginia. Recently, DNR and U.S. Corps of Engineers biologists, in cooperation with State Parks, have been moni-



Biologists Kirk Piebler, formerly with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Jim Fregonara with the DNR, take measurements of one of the young osprey.

Marshall Snegedar



The osprey nesting platform in Stonewall Jackson Lake.

Marshall Snegedar

toring an osprey nest at Stonewall Jackson Lake.

However, any declines in water quality that affect fish populations will decrease the chances for osprey in West Virginia. Disturbance at nest sites may also cause adults to abandon the nest. As human recreation on our large rivers and lakes continues to increase, the chances for conflict due to harassment or disturbance to nests increases. Indiscriminate shooting is still a problem in some areas. On the wintering grounds, osprey may be affected by the continued use of pesticides and herbicides that are outlawed in the United States. In some areas of South and Central America osprey are eaten as food.

**Additional Comments:** Like all birds of prey, osprey are protected by Federal laws. If you see anyone shooting or harassing these birds, please report them to your county conservation officer.

**Help:** Report nest sites to the WV DNR, P.O. Box 67, Elkins, WV 26241 or call (304) 637-0245. If injured or dead osprey are encountered, report them to your local conservation officer.