

Osprey

How can osprey be distinguished from other birds?

Osprey are hawks that are distinguished by the 'M' shape of their wings and the dark brown line that stretches from the eye across the side of the face. Adults are brown on the back and have white chests, with a distinctive dark patch near the bend of the wing. Males are also smaller than female osprey.

What do osprey eat?

Osprey's diet consists of almost exclusively live fish. The osprey is able to dive into the water from great heights, surprising fish with their sharp talons. The osprey's opposable toes and barbed footpads allow it to hold onto its catch as it returns to the nest.

Do any animals eat osprey?

Adult ospreys do not have many predators, although great horned owls and bald eagles have been known to sometimes kill osprey chicks and adults. The primary predator is the raccoon, who will steal and eat osprey eggs found in nests.

Where do osprey live?

Osprey are widespread, found on every continent except for Antarctica. They live close to bodies of water with an abundant source of fish, such as saltmarshes, rivers, ponds, or estuaries.

Osprey nest in both manmade and natural elevated structures near water, including dead trees, light towers, and manmade platforms. Most nests are built of sticks and lined with additional natural materials, and the elevation helps protect against raccoons.

Do osprey live here year-round?

Osprey spend the warm spring and summer months in North America and travel south for winter. They may travel more than 160,000 miles during their lifetime migrating to South and Central America for the winter.

At a Glance

Scientific Name: *Pandion haliaetus*

Body Length: 21-23 inches

Wingspan: 54-66 inches

Weight: 2.5-4.5 lbs

Avg. Lifespan: 15-20 years

Diet: Fish

Habitat: Elevated nests along shallow bodies of water (marshes, ponds, rivers, estuaries)

Reproduction: 1-4 eggs each year

Incubation Period: 36-42 days

Nestling Period: 50-55 days

Population Status: Least Concern



Adult osprey with three chicks in their nest.



Osprey eggs in a typical built nest.



Osprey transports its prey headfirst back to its nest.

Questions?

Contact us at info@chesapeakeconservancy.org

How do osprey raise their young?

Osprey eggs do not hatch all at once; chicks can hatch up to 5 days apart. The female osprey lays between 2-5 eggs each year in the spring. The female does most of the incubating, while the male brings her food. When the chicks hatch, they rely on their parents to bring food. The separation in hatch time can be a disadvantage for the younger chicks when food is scarce, since older chicks can dominate when parents bring the fish back to the nest. After only 5-6 weeks, the young osprey are ready to fly, spending the next few months learning to hunt and survive before leaving their parents' nest.

Are ospreys endangered?

Like other birds of prey, osprey populations declined dramatically from the 1950s to 1970s because of the inability to produce healthy chicks due to pesticide poisoning. With the ban of DDT in 1972 and osprey nest-building efforts, populations have been steadily increasing. Now, Partners in Flight estimates a global breeding population of 500,000. In some states, however, osprey are still listed as endangered because of continued pesticide use and shoreline development.

Osprey are particularly good indicators of the health and productivity of an ecosystem. Chemicals can accumulate through the food chain, resulting in high concentrations of chemicals in osprey. The health of osprey populations in the Chesapeake is a good way to measure the effectiveness of conservation actions in the watershed.

Fun Facts

- The name "osprey" first appeared in 1460 as the Medieval Latin phrase for "bird of prey" – *avis prede*.
- When diving into the water to catch fish, osprey can close a third semi-transparent eyelid that acts as goggles to help them see underwater.
- Osprey position their prey head first reduce wind resistance when transporting its fish – their opposable outer toe and barbed footpads help hold onto the prey during flight.
- After years of adding to a nest, osprey can end up with nests as big as 13 feet deep and 6 feet in diameter.
- The oldest known osprey was 25 years, 2 months old!

Sources:

"Osprey." *All About Birds*. Cornell Lab of Ornithology. <http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/osprey/id>.

"Osprey." *Explore Raptors*. The Peregrine Fund. <http://www.peregrinefund.org/explore-raptors-species/Osprey#sthash.cjSCLHln.dpbs>.