

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)

Ospreys, sometimes referred to as fishhawks, have a worldwide distribution, wintering or breeding on every continent except Antarctica. Ospreys usually return to Barefoot Beach Preserve to breed each year in December or January. The male usually returns up to a week earlier than the female. Osprey pairs use the same nest each year. Upon return, they spend time repairing the nest before eggs are laid. Both sexes collect materials for the nest, but the female does most of the arranging of materials at the nest. Last week, I saw a male bring a nice long twig to the nest near the beach at the third access. The female fiddled



and fiddled, then finally pulled out a previous twig, threw it out of the nest, then worked the new longer twig into place. Osprey nests are typically constructed of sticks or twigs and lined with softer materials such as grasses or seaweed—another use for seaweed on the beach this time of year! Take a walk on the east Saylor Trail and look for the nest to the right as you head south. You will see a piece of orange barricade fencing woven into the nest—it has been there since at least last season. They recycle!



Ospreys are diurnal, which means they are active during the day. They usually mate for life and are generally monogamous. Once a pair has established a nest, the male will deliver food to the female. After mating, two to four eggs are laid. The male and female both take turns incubating the eggs, which will hatch in about 32 days. Incubation starts when the first egg is laid, so the eggs will hatch in the order they were laid. Approximately a month after hatching, chicks will be 70 to 80% of an adult's size. Chicks in south Florida usually fledge between 7 to 8 weeks. Parents take the young out fishing, showing how to make a catch. Soon after fledging, young Ospreys are able to hunt on their own. Usually by May, the parents leave the Preserve to begin their migration. According to Towson University, parents take separate vacations after breeding. Juveniles usually stay in the general area they were born for their first summer and do not migrate until the following year.

Their diet consists almost exclusively of fish; however, they are known to also eat small mammals, birds, or reptiles. When catching fish, an Osprey hovers briefly after spotting a fish; dives toward the surface of the water; then plunges feet-first into the water. Once airborne, the Osprey rearranges the fish in its feet, carrying it with one foot in front of the other so that the fish is facing head first. The Osprey is particularly well adapted to this diet, with reversible outer toes and backwards-facing scales on the talons which act as barbs to help hold its catch. They usually take the fish to a favorite high perch to eat, generally starting with the head and working toward the tail. A male providing food for a mate and offspring will usually consume at least part of the fish before delivering the remainder to the female.

Ospreys reach up to 24 inches long with a 6-foot wing span. Female Ospreys are generally heavier than males. The female may have darker plumage and a more defined mottled “necklace” than their male counterparts. You can see the female's “necklace” pattern at her neck line in the photo to the right. Compare it to male in top right photo. Other identifying markings for both sexes include a dark stripe through each eye, a white belly, and a dark brown back. The feet are pale blue-gray, and the beak is black. Juvenile Ospreys resemble adults, but are somewhat speckled due to buff-colored tips on their dark brown upper-wing and back. Juveniles have an orange-red iris, while adults typically have a yellow iris.



Juveniles usually have their adult plumage by the time they are 18 months old. Ospreys are a relatively long-lived species, averaging 15 - 20 years according to banding data. The oldest known Osprey in North America was a 25-year old male; however, very few live to be that old. Ospreys are vulnerable to predation from aerial predators. Great Horned Owls and Bald Eagles are known predators of Osprey nestlings and sometimes adults.