

Osprey

Pandion haliaetus

In 2005, a pair of ospreys successfully bred along the Roaring Fork River for perhaps the first time in recorded history. Historical documents make no reference of ospreys breeding in the Roaring Fork Valley although many have undoubtedly passed through during migration. In our area a nest was documented in the late 1800s near Arrowhead Lake above Dotsero.

In 2003, the Roaring Fork Conservancy and Excel Energy constructed a nesting platform near the LaFarge gravel pit on the lower Roaring Fork; the goal was to entice the birds away from a precarious nest on an electric pole to the more stable and safe nesting platform. After inhabiting the nest for a couple of years, the osprey pair successfully fledged two birds in 2005.

Healthy water, abundant food, and continued riparian area protection could entice more of these magnificent raptors to breed and populate the Roaring Fork Watershed.

DESCRIPTION

Ospreys are large raptors but not as broad and bulky as eagles and red-tailed hawks. An osprey can measure 22 to 25 inches from head to tail, have a wingspan of 52 to 72 inches, and weigh three to six pounds. Sometimes confused with bald eagles, osprey are smaller and less bulky than eagles who also lack the black wrist patches that stand out against the white body and upper wing of osprey. Ospreys will often hover before diving and, unlike eagles, rarely

miss their prey.

Adult birds have brown upper wings and body, and white chests and armpits. Distinctive markings of these birds include black wrist patches under wing, a black throat band on females, and a dark eye stripe. Additionally, the osprey has much narrower wings that are always angled and bowed down. Ospreys are most often mistaken for gulls in flight due to wing shape and color. Ospreys are very vocal raptors, making

a short shrill whistle from the perch or while flying.

NATURAL HISTORY

Given that ospreys hunt primarily fish, individuals tend to live and breed very near healthy water. Nests are usually found at the top of trees and snags, telephone poles, and more recently, on nesting platforms. Both the

male and female will take part in building nests as high up as 60 feet above the ground. Most nests are used for a number of years in a row and can grow to a huge size as birds add more and more material.

An osprey will scan for prey from a nest or perch or while hovering between 30 and 100 feet high before diving into the water feet first to catch fish. On rare instances osprey will take rodents, birds, and crustaceans. Regardless of the prey, the osprey has great power and rarely loses grasp of the prey. Birds have feet with large scales that aid in clutching prey and two talons in the back and front for holding large fish. Dives may result in a bird becoming completely immersed in the water; on occasion a bird may drown



A pair of osprey nesting on top of a nesting platform that was placed by Excel Energy and Roaring Fork Conservancy near the Roaring Fork River. Jonathan Lowsky

due to difficulty letting go of a fish that's too large to carry. However, due to feathers that are more water resistant than other raptors, the dive is usually successful and the fish is carried to the nest or a nearby tree for consumption. In flight, an osprey will often drop a fish only to catch it again in mid-air. This amazing display of aerial acrobatics ensures that the fish is carried in the more aerodynamic head-first position.

BREEDING

Osprey females will lay two to four eggs that are whitish pink and marked with brown and olive spots. Eggs are incubated for 32 to 43 days by both adult birds. When young break from eggs they are considered semi-altricial (immobile, downy, eyes open, and fed by parents). Males will bring food to the female from the moment of pair bonding until the young birds fledge. Over the course of the first ten days the female feeds the young birds regurgitant. After the first ten days and until fledging, the young are fed pieces of fish by the female. Nests with three young need more than six pounds of fish daily! Young will fledge anywhere between 48 to 59 days.

CONSERVATION

Osprey populations crashed between 1950s and 1970s, due to the use of DDT. This pesticide moves through the food chain and becomes more concentrated at each step in a process called bioconcentration. For animals at the top of the food chain this is especially damaging. DDT causes raptors to lay eggs with extremely thin eggshells that often never hatch. Elimination of DDT has enabled the birds to rebound in great enough numbers that they are con-

sidered a recovered species.

Unfortunately, in many areas the birds are threatened by increased mercury levels in prey populations. Some evidence is also being gathered that poisoning in the winter habitats of Chile and Argentina is also on the increase.

Ospreys in the Roaring Fork Valley During the summer months look for osprey high

trees or hovering above the water searching for fish. Ospreys will spend much of their time close to the nest. The pair near the confluence of the Roaring Fork River and Cattle Creek may be the easiest to spot with high-powered binoculars. During the migration of spring and fall many birds will pass through and ospreys can be sighted anywhere in the valley. Like so many

of the species dependent on high quality water and a healthy riparian zone, ospreys are most easily seen from a boat during a trip down the Roaring Fork River.

Continued protection of the watershed's high quality water, increased protection of riparian areas, and introduction of additional nesting platforms could lead to a stable population of breeding birds throughout our watershed. Look for these magnificent birds as they continue to expand their range in western Colorado, creating new nest sites in Carbondale, Ruedi Reservoir, Rifle and Parachute.

For more information on ospreys in the Roaring Fork Watershed contact Roaring Fork Conservancy at (970) 927-1290.



Ospreys are true fish eaters, often catching fish and repositioning them in mid-flight to increase their aerodynamics.

*Compiled by Brent Hayes
April 2006*



ROARING FORK CONSERVANCY

P.O. Box 3349, Basalt, Colorado 81621
(970) 927-1290 www.roaringfork.org

Bringing People Together to Protect Our Rivers