

F O C U S



56

Osprey

Rich Stallcup

OSPREYS, LIKE EAGLES, are literally and figuratively the poster birds for world wilderness. They are also magnificent living verification that restoration of habitats, protection from alien harm, and environmental clean-up can correct and repair global human-caused damage.

It is hard to believe, but ever since white people arrived in North America in the 1500s, these awe-inspiring birds have been battered and bashed until both the eagle species and the Osprey hit rock-bottom population levels in the 1960s.

Populations of Osprey and Bald Eagle—birds that are top-level predators in aquatic food chains—crashed in the 1950s and 1960s, because herbicides, especially DDT, were liberally sprayed on the land and later washed into creeks, rivers, lakes, deltas, bays and oceans.

That and other forms of damage are behind us, at least for now. Through various levels of protection from gunfire and poison, population resurrection has occurred. So recently rare, Ospreys are now common, thriving and increasing annually.

Here are some facts about the Osprey, a bird that many people are encountering more frequently these days.

Ospreys that nest in the northern states and Canada are migratory, flying

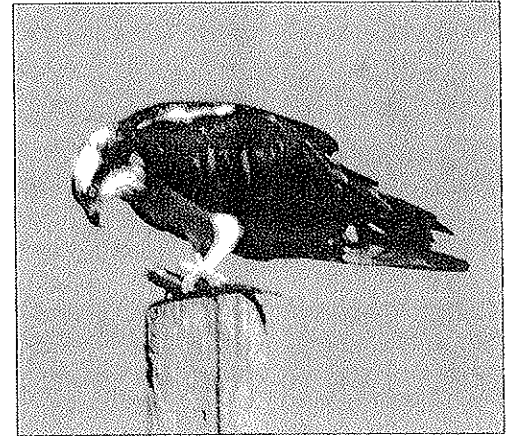
towards or past the tropics in winter. At Cape May, New Jersey, about 5,000 each fall and as many as 800 on a single autumn day are counted. Oddly, very few are logged at the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory, even though large numbers do nest north of there along the coast.

In little Marin County, about 50 pairs nest, and each nest averages just over one chick per season. That puts 150 Ospreys there in late summer. At this latitude (where all coastal waters remain unfrozen), about 10% of the population (15 birds) remain to winter. At least some of these are older, more dominant individuals that are standing on their nests in the best territories when the first migrants return in January! Young birds do not return to their nesting areas until their third calendar year, when they become of breeding age.

Fish lovers

OSPREYS are so attached to fish that many carry one (or part of one) during migration, especially if over dry land. They pack their lunch!

Special adaptations for handling slippery things are Osprey's tools. The outer toe (of three forward) is reversible to form an X of claws, for a more even grasp with symmetrical strength. The soles of the feet are covered with slime-buster spicules for non-slip grip.



Fish are carried head-first to cut down on wind resistance, and the Osprey has grooves on its *hallux* nail (its talon) for traction.

Still, some birds try for fish that are simply too big or of the wrong sort, rarely causing an Osprey to drown. One bird off Florida was seen to repeatedly dive on and catch a blowfish or pufferfish. Four times in a row, the fish became bigger and rounder, and it soon burst from the flying predator's grasp.

Ospreys are now such a routine feature of the coast itself that many humans (even some birders) barely give them a glance. Some of us, however, have taken the opportunity to not only look hard at every bird but attempt to identify the species of fish it is carrying. My list so far is top smelt, rubber-lipped sea perch, Pacific sand dab, starry flounder, steelhead, plainfin midshipman, China rockfish and, at Pyramid Lake, Nevada, the rare and sacred Quiwi.

Ospreys are truly magnificent birds. Let us not take them for granted: not long ago they had practically vanished.

Rich Stallcup is PRBO's Naturalist in our Education Program.

This Osprey caught a rubber-lipped sea perch that was much too big. It could fly only a few feet from the surf and had to put down in a rough neighborhood where muggers were reported.

