



Why Wildlife Matters: An Ode To Osprey

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Spring 2024 Newsletter

By Stephanie Ellis, Executive Director, Wild Care, Inc.

Osprey have become a beloved icon in New England. Perched atop their high nests overlooking water. Cape Cod is currently home to the largest population of Osprey in all of MA with an estimated ~500 pairs.

Adept at fishing, Osprey favor breeding sites near water with a commanding view. Unfortunately, these are often the types of sites that humans seek out as well.

Life Cycle:

Adult Osprey return to their breeding location annually in MA around St. Patrick's Day, in mid to late March. Many of these adult birds are returning from a winter in Florida or South America. Bonded pairs will meet at the nest site, typically with the male arriving earlier than the female. They are monogamous, but females will mate with multiple males. What takes place after their arrival is an age-old ritual of nest building, breeding, and raising the chicks. These are no small tasks!

Once Osprey arrive and are settled, they quickly begin nest building, or establishing new nest sites. The male collects the nesting materials, while the female arranges them. These massive nests take weeks to build and repair so that they are suitable for nesting.

The female lays 2-4 eggs. Typically one egg is laid every 3 days. Incubation is 34-43 days with eggs hatching in May or early June in MA. The eggs are incubated once laid, meaning the chicks hatch asynchronously and can be anywhere from 3-12 days apart in age. Chicks are semi-altricial. They are downy when hatched, and eyes are open. They are dependent on their mother for warmth and food for many weeks. The chicks are brooded only by the female, while the male brings her food and nesting materials. The female carefully tears small pieces of fish brought by the male, to feed the young. At six weeks of age, the chicks begin tearing fish apart on their own. This is mom's cue that her job is done. The female leaves, and will soon begin her migration south. The male is in now in charge of hunting and bringing the chicks food. Fledging takes place around around 44-59 days (8-10 weeks). At this time, the young birds begin taking longer aerial forays, and eventually go to water to learn how to hunt for fish.

Osprey begin migrating south beginning in late August in MA. Because of the length of development in the nest and the practice required for learning to hunt, It is not uncommon to see juveniles with dad, lingering into late September. Juveniles are on their own during migration. Life is tough when you are an Osprey. According to local experts, only 10% of young Osprey survive to return to their natal nesting grounds ~three years later. (Kevin Friel, The Osprey Project, Falmouth, MA)

Osprey Are A Conservation Success Story:

Osprey are remarkable creatures. They are long-lived with a lifespan of 7-10+ years. They have come back from the brink of local extirpation and are now surviving and *thriving* in New England.

In the early 1900's, it was believed we had 60-80 pairs of Osprey in MA. By the 1940's, that number increased to over 1,000 breeding pairs. However, the population plummeted by over 90% in the 1960's due to DDT pesticide spraying. This caused thinning of eggshells and led to the demise of raptor populations including Osprey, Bald Eagles and Peregrine Falcons. It was not until 1972 that DDT was banned by the federal government. By then, it was *nearly* too late for these species.

In 1976, we had one known pair of Osprey nesting in the town of Dennis. The last of the known Cape Cod Osprey. Because of DDT, combined with loss of habitat and nesting trees, these populations were not going to recover on their own. Mass Audubon sprung into action. They began erecting Osprey platforms in ~1977. Construction of these artificial platforms have helped Osprey to recover and surpass their historic levels. (MA Osprey data, courtesy of Mass Audubon and MassWildlife.)

Current Dilemmas for Osprey:

In locations such as Cape Cod where we have a high density of Osprey, their conflicts are primarily human ones. Deforestation - lack of appropriate tree tops or cliffs for nesting, has forced Osprey to nest on the next best thing - utility poles, chimneys, docks, boats, and other mandmade structures near water. Nest site fidelity is very strong. When nests are removed and deterrents are not immediately put in place, Osprey may spend their *entire* season attempting to rebuild in that one spot. Osprey frequently become entangled in fishing debris and other materials that they incorporate into their nests. Fishing debris ingestion and illegal shooting of Osprey are far too common. The impacts these birds face are not just in New England. Osprey are hunted and consumed in some parts of South America where they spend their winters.

What I have learned?

Last year I had the privilege of incubating Osprey eggs, raising the chicks, and placing them into wild foster nests (with MassWildlife permission, and under Wild Care's Federal license). These eggs came from nests removed from chimneys by USDA. This entire process was both exhilarating and exhausting. I am grateful for every minute of it. I also learned an enormous amount about Osprey. I learned that these birds survive against all odds and human encroachment. They are resilient, and also stubborn. We placed one set of chicks into a nest with a Live Cam. The footage showed what skilled and gentle parents Osprey are. The female navigated around the young delicately, with clenched gentle fists. The male was forever bringing sticks and moss, to seemingly appease the female. The precision by which small bite-sized pieces of fish were torn and given to each young Osprey was awe-inspiring. What I witnessed was a team of birds working in unison to successfully raise their young.

Why Osprey?

This season, we have already received 3 clutches of eggs from nests that were removed from homes and other manmade structures, by USDA. Our Animal Care Staff is incubating them at Wild Care. The search is on for nests we can place our eggs into, or soon chicks. Yesterday, we successfully placed 3 eggs into a late-in-the-season nest where a female only had one egg. She began incubating all of her eggs immediately. Success!

Some people have asked, "Why are you putting so much effort into these birds? Their population is exploding and they are becoming a nuisance."

Just 50 years ago, Osprey were nearly extirpated. I firmly believe there is no better time to learn about and preserve a species, than when they are abundant. Let's prevent history from repeating itself, and learn from our past mistakes. With so much of our world's wildlife in decline, let's celebrate a species that is actually thriving amongst all odds!

Osprey Info and Nest Removal Regulations in MA: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/ospreys-in-massachusetts#:~:text=Ospreys%20will%20lay%201-4,from%20Florida%20to%20South%20America>.

Osprey Photos by Kerry Reid and Carl Jacobs

OSPREY



OSPREY NEST



OSPREY EGG



OSPREY CHICKS



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