Bay State Ospreys: A Successful Recovery

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A REMARKABLE COMEBACK!!

LIVELY PAIRINGS of fisher hawks increase the osprey population by two or three chicks each summer in New England then depart for a warmer climate in late August.

After strengthening muscles and increasing flight ability, the siblings follow the parents south before the cold weather sets in.

This American osprey pair returns each year to Skaket Marsh in Brewster and nests on a pole that a couple of workers from the forestry camp replaced after the original pole rotted away. The new pole sits farther out into the estuary and closer to the bay.

Ospreys both young and adults, become victims of Great Horned owls, which hunt at night. The ospreys hunt

by day, and are easy prey when sitting atop the nest in the dark.

Ospreys mate for life, and mated pairs return the last weeks in March and began refurbishing the nest for last summer. Young ospreys hatch around the end of May and fledge about eight weeks later.

Every day they fly in circles around the nest, gaining strength. These birds hang out in the north until August or September, and then migrate – some northeastern ospreys spend winters as far south as Argentina.

The same pair raised three youngsters the previous year, and had several successful nests in the past.

In an intriguing partnership, the male feeds the female while she incubates the eggs, and the female and young after hatching until she can leave the nest and help him hunt. Later, both feed the young while teaching the offspring to hunt for themselves

As predators, ospreys live at the top of the food chain and respond quickly and critically to habitat loss, or change. Osprey reproductive success is a prime indicator of environmental stability as well. Ospreys accumulate chemicals and pollutants from the live prey they eat, and that contamination affects the reproductive process.

Around the turn of the century, logging and land clearing for housing and agriculture along the Atlantic coast reduced osprey habitat, primarily tall trees along the shorelines, and the populations began shrinking steadily. In the 50s and 60s, chemical pollutants – DDT and DDE in particular – contaminated the adult birds, and the chemical accumulation in reproductive biology reduced offspring success. The birds laid eggs with shells so thin they broke while the female nested, or even if the eggs hatched, the young were so weak they died.

Although never classified as endangered or threatened, some states, including Massachusetts considered ospreys a "Species of Special Concern" because the population bottomed-out at about 11 nesting pairs in early 1970's, prior to the ban on DDT. The "'Special Concern" designation indicates a need for more information on a species, the numbers, and the distribution and habitat requirements.

Over several years, a group of Massachusetts biologists collected field information on the number of nesting pairs and identified a lack of natural nesting sites as one limiting factor to population recovery. And the habitat recovery program along with installing the nesting poles created a viable environment for these raptors.

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1972 offered federal protection to ospreys – which also helped the populations recover.

By 1981 the osprey population in Massachusetts rose to 41 nesting pairs. In a unique partnership with ComElectric and other utilities, the state began an extensive recovery project, installing more than 100 nesting platforms on old power poles across the southeast portion of the state.

Today, more than ninety percent of the nesting ospreys in Massachusetts nest on artificial platforms or other man-made structures. An example – one pair of ospreys has returned and nested in Hyannis for the past six years, raising youngsters on a light pole behind the high school. The Cape Cod Baseball League has played games without light from that pole for several years. The Massachusetts birds respond well to the artificial nesting structures and began increasing reproductive success ratios.

MassWildlife removed ospreys

from the Species of Special Concern list in 1990 when its population reached 200 nesting pairs, but monitored the population until it crested at 300 pairs. MassWildlife still provides technical assistance to citizens who encourage the birds and offer guidance when ospreys are in conflict with people.

An extremely successful predator, Ospreys live on every continent in the world except Antarctica.

*Define the Osprey *

The American osprey, or fisher hawk, has white body plumage on its breast and throat, a dark band around its eyes, and darker red/brown feathers on its back and wings. The wings span 60 to 72 inches, and the birds stand about 24 inches tall.

Ospreys always live near water, and follow the waterways when they migrate as well. This raptor species exists on every continent except Antarctica, although about 75% of breeding pair worldwide nest in North America, and about half of those in the United States. Ospreys generally mate for life, unless reproduction problems occur. If a pair nests unsuccessful for several years, they often separate and seek new mates.

Ospreys lay from two to five eggs that hatch five to six weeks later. The young stay on the nest about two months, and then begin learning to fly and hunt. At four to six months, the New England ospreys migrate south for the winter. Osprey pairs do not migrate together, but most often return to the same nest and the same partner year after year.

Female osprey feeds her young a bit of fish the male brought to the nest.

Ospreys feed almost exclusively on live fish, small mammals, crustaceans, or but occasionally supplement the diet with amphibians. These raptors have extremely sharp eyesight and they can distinguish between a six-inch fish and a six-inch stick lying in the water from hundreds of feet in the air.

Hovering above a body of water, they spot fish swimming beneath the surface, then dive and plunge feet first into the water, grasping the prey with powerful talons. The osprey reverses the fish until its head points forward, and then flies back to its nest or a perch, and eats. Tiny spikes on the soles of its feet and four opposing toes with long talons maintain a tight grip on the slippery prey.