



Osprey

Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) are highly specialized raptors that prey upon fish. They are found throughout the world and regularly nest in Alaska along lakes, rivers, and coastlines south of the Brooks Range. Although they are relatively uncommon, they can be seen during the summer months soaring over the water searching for fish. Keen eyesight, sharp curved talons, and the ability to dive feet first into the water make the osprey an unusually efficient predator. Biologists estimate that an osprey may be successful at catching fish four out of five attempts. Ospreys have even been reported to have captured two fish in one dive.

General description: In flight, ospreys are recognized by their long, crooked wings as they soar overhead. Although ospreys are large birds with a wingspan of 5½ feet (1.67 meters), they only weigh about 3 pounds (1.4 kg). From a distance, an osprey at rest may resemble the bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). Closer examination will reveal that, unlike a bald eagle, the osprey has darkly barred wings and tail, black bill, and bluish-gray lower legs. The underside of ospreys' bodies and wings are white, and a dark cheek patch contrasts with the white head. Female ospreys are slightly larger than males and are occasionally distinguishable by a more distinct "necklace" of dark feathers on their upper breast.



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Life history: Ospreys are migratory and spend their winters in Mexico and Central and South America. Ospreys return to Alaska in late April. A breeding pair probably mates for life and returns to the same nest area each year. Both adults help to build the large stick nest (3-6 feet (1-2 m) in diameter). The nest is situated near water, atop trees, posts, rock pinnacles, or even the ground. The nest bowls are lined with soft grasses. In mid-May the female lays two to four eggs which are incubated by both parents for five weeks. Newly hatched ospreys are covered with gray down and are helpless. Females closely guard their nestlings from the weather and predators while the male provides the family with food. At 4 to 5 weeks of age, the nestlings begin wing-flapping exercises and are ready to fly at 7 to 8 weeks of age (mid-August). Although almost fully grown when they leave the nest, young ospreys can be distinguished from their parents by buffy fringes on all of their back feathers. Most ospreys have departed Alaska by October. Ospreys have been known to live for 25 years.

Feeding habits: The osprey's diet is mainly fish. They are not particular about the species of fish they catch, but they can only catch fish swimming within 3 feet (1 m) of the water's surface. They rarely take fish over 16 inches (40 cm) long. Ospreys occasionally capture small mammals, birds, amphibians, and reptiles. Anglers sometimes complain of ospreys competing with them for fish; however, an osprey needs only one 10-inch (25 cm) fish per day, so it is doubtful they have much impact on fish populations.

Management: Little is known about the status of osprey populations in Alaska. They frequently adapt to human activities, but any disturbances which keep adults from their nests in May or June may cause the eggs or young nestlings to become chilled and die. The osprey is adversely affected by stream or waterway alterations, specifically those which reduce fish populations or visibility in areas traditionally used as feeding areas. Osprey are highly susceptible to egg thinning by pesticide contamination. Osprey populations in the 48 contiguous states are beginning to recover following the ban on DDT and other persistent pesticides. It is illegal to kill ospreys, or any other bird of prey in Alaska.

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