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FLYING HIGH
Osprey takes on new role as ambassador
By TIMOTHY O'HARA Keys Citizen 22 hrs ago



Florida Keys Wild Bird Rehabilitation Center Operations Director Bayleigh MacHaffie, left, and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Officer Jason Rafter tend to a young osprey who fell and was permanently injured while learning to fly. Photos provided

A young Upper Keys osprey may have been born to be one of the sky's top winged predators, but it will soon have a new role as ambassador for his species.

In April, the young osprey, believed to be younger than 2 years old, was spotted on the ground beneath an established nest at Island Christian School in Islamorada. It is not uncommon for young birds to be on the ground while they are learning to fly. However, this osprey was exhibiting signs of a wing droop after being on the ground for a few days, said Bayleigh MacHaffie, operations director at the Florida Keys Wild Bird Rehabilitation Center.

Once admitted to the center's hospital, staff was able to take X-rays and determined the bird had a severe coracoid fracture, MacHaffie said. The coracoid is a bone in the chest of birds underneath the collarbone that is shaped like a wishbone. The osprey most likely broke his coracoid falling from his nest. A broken coracoid heavily affects the flight capabilities of birds, MacHaffie said.

After giving the bird time to heal, center staff started flight conditioning.

"We gave the bird access to a large flight enclosure where he could practice flying back and forth to build up his muscles and stamina," MacHaffie said. "While most ospreys are very picky eaters in captivity, this bird ate very well, which aided in his recovery process. Unfortunately, the osprey never regained full flight capabilities and was deemed non-releasable."

"He can fly, and he can get around, but his flight isn't great," MacHaffie added.

However, the osprey made a great candidate for permanent placement as an educational ambassador, MacHaffie said.

Center staff was quickly in communication with Wild Wings Inc. located in Honeoye Falls, New York. Wild Wings has a bird-of-prey facility and nature center that was looking for an osprey for educational program. The transfer has been approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Wild Wings team drove down to the Upper Keys to pick up the bird. The bird will be transferred soon, but an exact date has not yet been scheduled.

"We are so excited about this placement and are happy that the osprey's story will continue to inspire and educate the public," MacHaffie said.

Wild Wings had an osprey for roughly 20 years, but the bird recently died from old age, Wild Wings Director Terry Kozakiewicz said.

"This is the best placement for this osprey that we could ask for," MacHaffie said. "They have extensive experience with an osprey living in captivity. That was important for us. They have a pool with live fish so it will be able to hunt."

Wild Wings Inc is a not-for-profit educational organization that houses roughly 30 bird of prey facility and the Mendon Ponds Park Nature Center. Wild Wings cares for permanently injured and non-releasable animals which are unable to survive on their own in the wild.

"It's a perfect fit," Kozakiewicz said of the osprey. "There is so much education we can pass along to the public with this osprey. Education is a big part of what we do."

"And there is also the awe factor," Kozakiewicz added about the bird.

Kozakiewicz expects Wild Wings staff will take possession of the bird within the next several weeks, she said.

Wild Wing's mission is to foster awareness, enhance respect, and promote personal responsibility for the natural world, and the operators believe the key to environmental conservation and preservation is education. Wild Wings staff travel with many of the center's animals to schools, scout meetings and many other corporate and private events.

Wild Wings is a place where individuals learn about animals and the environment. The center does not charge an admission fee but relies on donations and programming to be able to feed and care for the animals. All donations and sales go directly to the animals.

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