Ospreys Have A Shocking Spring Migration!

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Written by Jenna Reynolds, President/Director of Save Coastal Wildlife

Can you feel it? Spring is underway in the northern hemisphere. The first full day of spring, a warm Saturday full of bird and animal activity proved March is

Just like clockwork, capture (Pandion haliaetus), a species listed as threatened in New Jersey under the Endangered and Nongame Species Conservation Act of 1973, returns every spring from our winter migration. Ospreys are a fish eating bird of prey with a wingspan of 5 to 6 feet. Ospreys are a fish eating bird of prey with a wingspan of 5 to 6 feet. Spring migration is very fast-paced. Ospreys are among the first birds to migrate north from the tropics to start nesting.

The requirements of osprey every spring is one of the great natural wonders to watch for along the Jersey Shore. Ospreys are a fish eating bird of prey with a wingspan of 5 to 6 feet. Ospreys are also your coastal weather or climate change indicator. Ospreys are the first sight of a long distance osprey as a sure sign of spring!

The first sample Ospreys to arrive in the Barnegat Bay area are the adult males. They arrive a few days ahead of the first osprey of the season. Females are not and about in search of the bird up and down the Jersey Shoreline. From Barnegat Bay, Ocean to Delaware Bay.

Ospreys are found on all continents except Antarctica, and always located near water. Depending on climate, ospreys migrate south to spend the winter. On an average, over a third upwards anything like a fish before making a catch in about 15 minutes. A much better success rate than most weekend warriors. along the Jersey Shore. Ospreys are a fish eating bird of prey with a wingspan of 5 to 6 feet

during spring migration when birds are in a rush and may not notice certain things to their demise. Another threat are oil spills in the waters of Venezuela. A September 24, 2020 article in The Washington Post written by by Mariana Zúñiga and Anthony Faiola tell us: "Venezuela's once powerful oil industry is literally falling apart, with years of mismanagement, corruption, falling prices and a U.S. embargo imposed last year bringing aging infrastructure to the brink of collapse. As the government scrambles to repair and restart its fuel-processing capacity, analysts are warning that ruptured pipelines, rusting tankers and rickety refineries are contributing to a mounting ecological disaster in this failing socialist state." Many osprey die every year from polluted water near Morrocoy National Park and in the Gulf of Paria.

But if not oil, then DDT. During the 1950s and throughout the 1970s in the United States, DDT (Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane), or more correctly its breakdown creation DDE, a colorless, tasteless, and almost odorless chemical compound used as an agricultural and household pesticide, caused the collapse of osprey populations throughout North America. The pesticide seeped into local waterways through runoff and accumulated in the tissues of marine organisms, including fish.

This bioaccumulation, the gradual accumulation of substances in an organism, of DDT seriously affected top predators, including osprey, bald eagles and peregrines. The toxin impaired a bird's ability to reproduce. DDT caused eggshell thinning which led to fewer and fewer young to replenish the population. Toxic chemicals probably also killed off some adults as well.

Alan F. Poole tells us in his book, *Ospreys, The Revival Of A Global Raptor*, that most population declined very quickly...many by at least 50% and a few by almost 90%." Poole goes on to declare that DDT, "interfered with the physiology of eggshell formation in females. Consequently, eggs were laid with thin shells and often failed to hatch, year after year populations struggled to gain new recruits."

The good news is that osprey populations have shown a gradual increase since DDT and similar toxic substances were federally banned in the United States in the 1970s. Water quality has also been slowly improving in the United States since the establishment of the Clean Water Act of 1972. Various government and nonprofit organizations and volunteers have also been busy building osprey nesting platforms to provide suitable nesting areas for the birds, as their coastal habitat largely became developed and fragmented during the DDT era.

According to the *2019 New Jersey Osprey Project Report*, there were 610 occupied osprey nests -- the most ever recorded in New Jersey - with around 95% of the population utilizing manufactured wooden nesting platforms. Of course, not all the nests were productive. Out of 569 nests, 488 were active and produced 932 young. Great news compared to having only about 50 nests in 1974 statewide. Osprey populations are on the rebound.

An osprey nest that is tangled up in fishing line.

Yet as ospreys return to a nesting platforms in the spring, the birds are unfortunately welcomed by one more sinister and deadly threat. This time it's plastic waste.

Adults and young are particularly at risk of becoming entangled in plastic string, bags, containers, or monofilament fishing line. The *2019 New Jersey Osprey Project Report* also tells us that volunteers have started to remove trash and collect data from osprey nests. In 2019, out of 149 nests they monitored, 47% contained plastic debris. We live in a society where unfortunately plastic litter is very easy to find, and since the birds live close to humans, plastic trash are often found in their nests.

Plastic debris can be seen in this nesting platform and many others along the Jersey Shore.

Why Do Ospreys Migrate?

Why do it? If given a choice, I'm sure many ospreys would prefer to stay year-round in the same location to avoid a lengthy and stressful migration twice a year. But Alan F. Poole states in *Ospreys: A Natural and Unnatural History*, that ospreys need a good supply of fish to survive, which is not possible to find during the winter in North America. Poole writes that fish, "are cold-blooded and thus sensitive to changes in water temperature. When temperatures drop, most avoid the colder shallows and surface waters where Ospreys can reach them. Thus even where northern lakes and bays do no freeze in winter, Ospreys attempting to winter over would probably starve."

Why do we care about ospreys?

These fish hawks play an important role in the health of an aquatic ecosystem. Ospreys help to provide balance among fish populations and keep fish populations genetically healthy by eating sick or scrawny individuals. Ospreys are also a valuable indicator species for monitoring the long-term health of an aquatic ecosystem. Birds of prey are extremely sensitive to many environmental changes in an ecosystem. Since an osprey's diet consists almost entirely of live fish, an abundance of nesting ospreys with many hungry young suggests water quality and fish populations might be improving to support many hungry beaks and gizzards.

What you can do to help protect ospreys:

- Avoid getting too close to nesting sites during the breeding season. Always maintain a respectful distance from wild animals. Always carry binoculars to view wildlife from afar. If an animal vocalizes when you're near, you are too close! Immediately back off.
- Restore coastal and wetland habitat.
- Preserve existing coastal habitat, including wetlands and dunes.
- Help keep local waters clean, healthy, and safe.
- Recycle used fishing Line.
- Volunteer to help members of Save Coastal Wildlife install new nesting platforms at wetland sites along the Jersey Shore. Artificial nesting platforms are generally more stable and safer than the natural nesting areas (usually dead trees). Nesting success is also commonly twice as high on artificial sites compared to natural sites.

If you don't live near an osprey nest, you can always watch the action online. There are many osprey nests on the web to watch. In 2019, The Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey installed a new osprey cam in Barnegat Light. The action can be seen here http://www.conservewildlifenj.org/education/osprey-cam/

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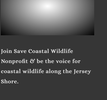

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"When a person learns to respect even the smallest being of creation...nobody has to teach that person to love someone. Compassion for animals is intimately connected with goodness of character, and it may be confidently asserted that a person who is cruel to animals cannot be a good person."

— Adapted from a statement by Albert Schweitzer