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# NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

## Osprey

*Pandion haliaetus*



By Aurora Hicks Beach

There are multiple names for the osprey; some are sea hawk, river hawk, fish hawk. The osprey is known for nesting near rivers and the sea and survives mainly on a diet of fish. The osprey can be found all over the world, except for the north and south poles.

The osprey has its own genus; the only two species in the genus are the western osprey and the eastern osprey.

### Characteristics

The osprey is one of the larger raptors. The wing span of the osprey is between 150cm–180cm (60in–71in), the length is 60cm (24in). The bird weighs between 1.4 to 2kg (3-4.4lb).

The topside of the wings is a dark brown, with the underside and belly being mostly white but slightly mottled. The defining feature of the bird is the white face with the signature brown line across the eyes. Depending on the subspecies, however, the shade of brown can be lighter. For example, the Caribbean subspecies has a mostly white head.

Between sexes, the female are on average 15-20% larger than the males, and for most subspecies the female has darker markings on the breast and a darker head.

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## Life Cycle

The osprey breeds in most areas of Canada and the US, it also migrates to warmer weathers down in Central and South America. However, not all ospreys are migratory; many species remain in the same area throughout the year.

In Canada, the ospreys breed between April and September. The eggs incubate for 40 days. Once hatched the chicks take about 2 months to fully fledge and begin to leave the nest in mid-July, though they stay close to the parents for another 3 weeks. The clutch size is between 1-4 eggs and the first egg can be laid up to 5 days before the last one. There is usually only one brood per year.

## Habitat

The osprey can have a wide range of habitat preferences. Fish is the main source of food for the osprey and as such, the nests are usually close to a body of water. As they cannot dive more than half a metre (3ft), the osprey prefer to hunt in shallow waters. The waters must have a good supply of fish but can be rivers, lakes, marshes or reservoirs.

## Behaviour

In order to catch their prey, ospreys have a unique hunting technique. The raptors fly high up into the sky to spot for schools of fish, once found the osprey dives into the water, from a height of up to 40 metres (130ft), and grasps the fish with its talons. The osprey has specially designed feet just for this. On the bottom of their feet there are sharp spines to grip on to slippery fish and there are opposable outer talons that rotate to allow for a more aerodynamic shape when holding fish.

The osprey almost exclusively lives off fish, and is the only hawk to do so. The size of the fish consumed varies greatly but mostly common sizes are between 20-30 cm.

## Threats

The osprey is top of the food chain however, in Canada, raccoons are known to consume the eggs and the great horned owl can eat the chicks. The bald eagle will also eat the nestlings and in incredibly rare circumstances the adults.

IUCN redlist: least concern and although protected in Canada and the US, they are no longer threatened. However, it was a close call in the 1950s and 1960s as the pesticide DDT was thinning the eggshells of the osprey and poisoning the food so very few survived. Thanks to conservation efforts, the species has rebounded and is now doing well.

## What We Can Do To Help

- Preserve wetland habitats by not draining or filling in wetland.
- Leave fallen trees in wooded areas where they fall – a dead tree has more living organisms and wildlife in it than a live tree, and the ground needs the decaying material back to help nurture new trees.
- Avoid making sudden loud noises around nesting birds – this can scare them into abandoning their nests and the young birds in the nests will die.
- Do not litter on land or in the water. Help clean up the environment – see <http://www.northwestwildlife.com/gcsc2004.php> for an article on the NWPS involvement in the “Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup” campaign.

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- Dispose of toxic substances such as antifreeze, batteries, and paint responsibly. Municipalities usually provide special disposal facilities for these types of things, as putting them down drains can be extremely toxic.
- Reuse and recycle whenever possible.
- Buy organic food – this supports farmers who are trying to preserve the environment by not using chemical pesticides and herbicides.
- Plant native plant species in your garden. See <http://www.stanleyparkecology.ca/programs/public/ivyBusters.php> for background on the introduced species English Ivy killing trees in Stanley Park.
- Do not feed wild animals. A wild animal can become dependent on humans for food and can become aggressive.
- Volunteer to help organizations like the Northwest Wildlife Preservation Society.
- Take the time to learn about wildlife. Take a walk and observe the wildlife around where you live.

## Other Interesting Facts

The oldest known osprey was at least 25 years old, and lived in Virginia. It was banded in 1973, and found in 1998.

Canada supports 1/3 of the osprey population.

## Where & When to view the animal

Osprey are migratory birds in North America, as they prefer the southern, warmer climate during the cold winter months. Therefore, to view these birds, it's best done during spring and summer when they are breeding. The osprey can be found throughout Canada, but not in Haida Gwaii and the far northeast. The highest concentration of osprey is along the river network of the interior and southwest coast: The lower Fraser, the Northern Rocky Mountain Trench.

## Bibliography

### Web Resources:

Photo credit

<http://wildkratts.wikia.com/wiki/Osprey>

Detailed description of the osprey including behaviour, adaptations and more;

<https://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/Species-Account/nb/species/osprey/overview>

<http://friendsoftheosprey.org/osprey-facts/>

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Osprey/overview>

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