

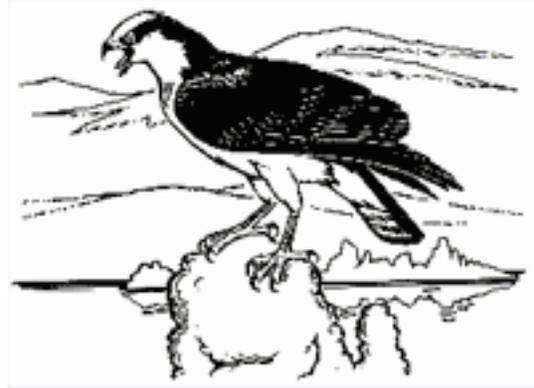
BIRD OF THE MONTH

At Mono Lake

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*)

About Osprey

The scientific name for Osprey is *Pandion haliaetus*, which means “sea eagle.” There is only one species of Osprey found in the world, yet they have worldwide distribution—wintering or breeding on every continent except Antarctica. Also known as the “fish hawk,” a unique characteristic of this fascinating bird of prey is that it is the only raptor that plunges into the water for fish. In fact, fish make up about 99% of an Osprey’s diet.



Carl Dennis Buell

A Fish-Eating Bird at Mono Lake?

Due to the high alkalinity of the water (pH 10), there are no fish in Mono Lake. Therefore, people are often surprised to see Osprey nesting in the area. No, the Osprey aren’t starving! Instead, they fly to nearby fresh water sources, such as Rush Creek or June Lake, to catch their fish and bring them back to the nest to eat. Since tufa towers are strong enough to support a bulky nest, plus are safe from ground-based predators, it’s worth the extra commute to get fish! In fact, one of the best places to view Osprey is at South Tufa, where Osprey often nest on top of nearby tufa towers.

The Perfect Fishermen

Some people consider Osprey to be the “perfect fishermen” because they are so well adapted to catching fish. They have relatively long legs for a raptor, spiny footpads called *spicules*, long, sharp, curved claws, and a reversible outer toe to aid in gripping slippery fish. Furthermore, they have dense oily plumage (making them waterproof, like a duck), and nasal valves that prevent water from entering the nostrils when the bird dives to catch fish. Osprey fish by flying and hovering over the water, watching the surface below. When prey is sighted, an Osprey dives steeply, its talons outspread and in front of its face, and splashes into the water. Osprey can grab fish up to three feet below the surface! The Osprey quickly comes up and, if it has made a catch, flies off, adjusting the fish in its claws so that the head is pointed forward (to make it more aerodynamic).

A Perilous Past ... and a Bright Future?

The Osprey is a California Bird Species of Special Concern. With the widespread use of the pesticide DDT, Osprey populations in many areas declined sharply from the 1950s through the 1970s. Between 1967 and 1972, there was only one known Osprey nest in all of Mono County! Fish would soak up DDT from water, and as Osprey ate these fish the DDT would build up in their bodies. The most detrimental effect of these high concentrations of DDT is the thinning of eggshells, so eggs crack when the parents try to

incubate them. The use of DDT in the United States was banned in the early 1970s, and the Osprey population has made a comeback to almost historic levels. However, DDT continues to be used in some countries that serve as wintering grounds for Osprey. Furthermore, the use of fertilizers and other pollutants that can run off into the water kill fish, leaving less food for Osprey, plus the cutting of dead trees that serve as nesting sites leave Osprey with less desirable sites that are more open to predation.

Amazing Osprey Facts

Osprey do not generally need to drink water; fish flesh supplies sufficient amounts to meet their requirements!

Osprey nests can weigh up to 1000 pounds and have been known to contain hula hoops, rag dolls, and toy boats!

Osprey generally pair for life and often return to the same nest year after year!

Osprey can fly normally at speeds up to 40 miles per hour, but when diving for a fish they can go as fast as 80 miles per hour!

Osprey can carry fish equal to their size (21-23 inches in length)!

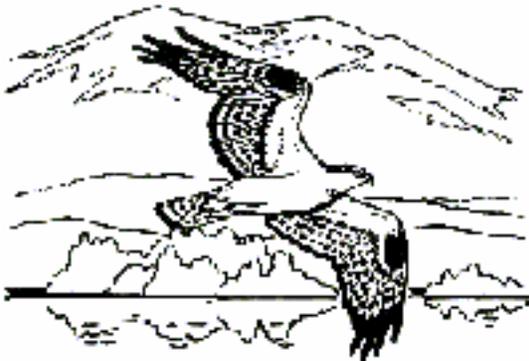
Bald Eagles and gulls compete with Osprey for food, often harassing an Osprey to make it drop its catch, and then stealing it!

Osprey parents will hold back food to encourage fledglings to leave the nest; sometimes fledglings will move to nearby nests where they are fed by other parents!

The longest known Osprey lifespan in the wild was 25 years!

What to Look For

Osprey are large raptors, with wingspans up to 6 feet! Their wings are long and narrow, and when they fly they have a distinct kink at their wrist, making an “M” shape when seen flying towards you. They have a white breast and belly with a black back and wings. Seen from below, the wings are mainly white with barred black tips and a large black mark at the bend in the wing, while their tail is striped black and gray. Possibly the most distinctive physical characteristic of the Osprey—that distinguishes them from



a bald eagle—is a dark brown eye stripe that blends into their short hooked black beak and broadens behind the eye. It stands out against their white cap and chin. If you have powerful binoculars or a spotting scope, try to see their yellow eyes! Their call is a short shrill whistle, sounded once or in a series, often heard around the nest.

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NESTING OSPREY ARE VERY SENSITIVE TO DISTURBANCE! PLEASE STAY AT LEAST 250 YARDS AWAY FROM ANY OSPREY NEST AT MONO LAKE!

For more information visit www.monolake.org

Bird of the Month: Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)

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