



Ospreys Back from the Brink

It just wouldn't be spring without the arrival of our local ospreys (fish hawks). These birds are neotropical migrants and they have been returning over the past few weeks from Brazil to their nesting grounds – here. Beginning back on March 8th I got my first phone text from Marcia Klock saying that one had been spotted. She, like many others, had her eyes peeled, anxious to be the first to report a sighting.

Currently some nests already have a pair; others, like our spotters, have their heads turned upwards awaiting the arrival of their mate. The older, experienced birds will begin the mating process now; new couples will be getting acquainted over the next few weeks.

As recently as 30 years ago we were down to about 50 pairs of ospreys in NJ, a sharp decrease from what was thought to be historical numbers of some 500. The effect of DDT, sprayed to control mosquitos, had worked its way up the food chain and impaired the reproductivity of these birds. It was a warning about our own health - what is often referred to as a canary in a coalmine. Workers used to take a caged canary into the mine with them. If the bird stopped singing it meant that oxygen was being displaced by gases from the earth and it was time to get out of the shaft. So the osprey played the same role in warning us that chemicals were present that would hurt other living things at the top of the food chain - us. It was time to discontinue the use of DDT. Unfortunately, people did not heed the warning of biologists for some time after the discovery was made, and further byproducts of DDT still persist.

My story today is about the hope for a different future. At present there are around 590 nesting osprey, thanks both to the banning of DDT and the diligence of people in restoring their numbers. The effort has been led by the Endangered and Nongame Species Program, NJ Fish and Wildlife, and Conserve Wildlife. Locally, here on the

Maurice and along the Delaware Bayshore, CU Maurice River has been instrumental in their return. I will probably do more articles about osprey because since 1985 we have put over 30 years of effort into this recovery process. We manage more than 40 nests; I've actually written stories about most of the ones on the Maurice. We have also constructed at least 50 others for use on restoration sites, mitigation projects, and the like. At one point our platforms represented as many as a third of the nesting sites in the state. And these nests have served as the basis for numerous descendants raising young in dead snags and all manner of natural and man-made locations.

This weekend we needed some able-bodied people to construct two platforms: one for placement at Money Island Blue Acres site and the other to have on hand. We anticipated that we might need it for Fortescue, to replace a severely tilted platform, or for some other problem site later. Hundreds of different volunteers have helped with this effort and this time was typical. Around 1 p.m. on Sunday we met at a private workshop site and, in about an hour and a half, a dozen volunteers made two nesting platforms and loaded them up for transport.

At Money Island and other bayside villages, homes that were being overtaken by water or devastated by hurricanes had been purchased by the State Blue Acres Program and torn down before they could further succumb to the rising tides. It is very sad to see the recreational Delaware Bayside villages disappear – truly the end of a way of life. It is sad to see the recreational Delaware Bayside villages disappear. Some of these homes were part-time residences and others belonged to full-time inhabitants. Some were intentionally modest and others have been major investments. In removing these varied structures some osprey nesting sites on docks and rooftops were also taken down. This loss requires mitigation to replace them. CU Maurice River was contracted to substitute a platform for some of these nests.

When we arrived at Money Island the Briggs/Wrens contributed their local knowledge of the site and helped us with orienting and installation. A gentleman from Fortescue also rendezvous-ed with us there to make sure that we would be able to find the problem Fortescue pole at our next location. He helped us connect with two of the original construction crew members who also live in Fortescue and were familiar with the damaged nesting

structure. And another woman, who from our perspective showed up *out of the blue*, came to help. Now our numbers had reached sixteen.

After raising up the 16' many-pound structure into place, we admired our work for a few minutes hoping to see some avian arrivals. Then we left to straighten out the platform at Fortescue. This was a bit tricky and we put a small slant in the pole in the opposite direction, hoping to oppose the forces that were causing it to tilt originally. (I'm sure folks will think that was an error.) We were all proud of our efforts: two nesting platforms ready for residents. And in fact three days later a pair was claiming one for their home.

I'm sharing the story because this is the way things work when people care. It is almost like the biblical tale of the loaves and the fishes: things simply develop to fill a need. That's what happened with the osprey. I chose this parable, the day when a few turned to plenty, because it mimics in so many aspects the needs of a declining species. There were few, many came to the rescue, and now there are plenty - a miracle of sorts. I especially like the fish part because a growing family of three young osprey will need six pounds of fish a day. Providing that much food will keep our new residents

very busy! So let's hope our populations can grow through protective measures to insure their future.

This past week when I parked my car at the office an osprey, insisting on being noticed, called out: a true announcement of spring, I turned my gaze skyward and shielded my eyes with my hand against the bright morning sun. I thought about all the people who made that sight possible. And I also wondered whether the baseball teams that play under the light stanchion supporting its nest know their story.

(this version is the CU Edited version and contains some information not in the newspaper version)

To learn more natural history of osprey or to read the anecdotes of the many nests along the Wild and Scenic Maurice River visit the avian section of CU's website: CUMauriceRiver.org