



Osprey

Rhode Island historically supported a substantial population of ospreys, (*Pandion haliaetus*), but in 1967 the population bottomed out at just two nests in the state as a result of DDT and related pesticides. Concentrations of contaminants, like DDT, increase as they travel up the food chain, passing from insect to fish to raptor. These bioaccumulated pesticides cannot be broken down by the body and cause disruption in raptor eggshell production. Females lay eggs so thin that they are often crushed under the weight of the females during incubation. Between 1940 and 1970, the number of active nests between New York City and Boston decreased by 85%. This earned ospreys a place on the USFWS Endangered Species List in 1976, four years after DDT was banned.

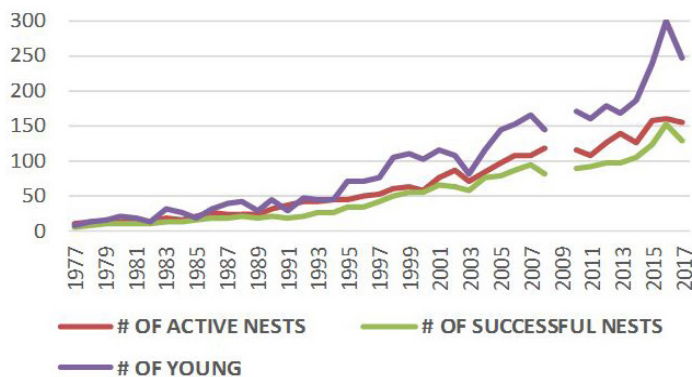
In 1977, the R.I. Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) took control of osprey conservation in Rhode Island and, by protecting ospreys habitat and creating suitable nesting areas, the population increased significantly. In 2010, RIDEM passed the osprey program to The Audubon Society of Rhode Island, who now monitor ospreys with the help of volunteers. There are now around 150 active nests throughout the state. Today, ospreys are no longer listed as Endangered but remain federally protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: Ospreys found nesting in Rhode Island are migratory, spending their winters in Central and South America. During the summer months, they will breed along the eastern and western coasts of the United States and Canada, as well as much of inland Canada. Florida and Mexico have year-round populations. Due to their dependence on fish to survive, ospreys are found in coastal areas as well as freshwater lakes, marshes, and rivers farther inland.

Food Habits: Ospreys prey almost exclusively on fish (both saltwater and freshwater), hovering above the water at heights up to 150 feet before diving feet first into the water to grab their prey. They will submerge their bodies fully under water, but because they are extremely buoyant, will rarely go more than a meter down. Ospreys have occasionally been observed catching snakes, eels, and frogs. Bald eagles and great black-backed gulls are often seen chasing ospreys to try to steal their prey.

RI Osprey Nest Data 1977 - 2017



Number of osprey active nests, successful nests, and fledged young in Rhode Island from 1977-2017. Data courtesy of the Audubon Society of Rhode Island. No data collected in 2009.

OSPREY IDENTIFICATION

Ospreys have dark brown feathers on their back, and white below, except for brown wrists and barred flight feathers. The head is white with a dark face stripe. Adults have yellow eyes, juveniles have orange. In flight wings appear bent with a slight crook in the wrist.

Wingspan: Up to 68 in

Length: 2 ft

Weight: 3-4 lbs (Females are generally larger than males)

Lifespan: 15-20 years

Reproduction: Ospreys migrate to Rhode Island and their other northern breeding grounds between March and April and stay until August. The young of the year may remain in the area through September before migrating south. The typical osprey nest is constructed of large sticks on a high perch over water or land which provide the birds with a high elevation, and an unobstructed view of their surroundings. Today, osprey nests can often be seen on electric poles or human-made platforms. The interior of the nest is lined with algae, bark, grass, and often plastic and trash. Ospreys mate for life and frequently return to the same nesting site each year.

Females lay an average of three eggs in April. Males may contribute to incubation but are primarily responsible for providing their mates with food. Eggs usually begin to hatch in late May after a 38-day incubation period. Females care for the newly hatched young while the males continue to bring them food. The young ospreys fledge after about 50 days, but continue to depend on their parents for another eight weeks. The young ospreys will remain at their southern wintering ground for two to three years before they become sexually mature and return to their breeding ground.

REGULATORY STATUS

Though populations have increased, and ospreys are no longer listed under the Endangered Species Act, they are still protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act (16 U.S.C. 703-712) makes it illegal for anyone to harm or possess any migratory bird, or migratory bird body, or the parts (including feathers), active nests, or eggs, or young.

LIVING WITH OSPREYS

Osprey nests can at times be problematic to people when they are built on human-made structures. They build their nests on electric poles, power lines, and even boats. Removing an active osprey nest (a nest with eggs or chicks) is a federal offense under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. However, if an in-active osprey nest is becoming a nuisance, it is possible to remove the nest under certain circumstances. Contact the Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife at DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov or call (401) 789-0281 for more information.

DID YOU KNOW...

- Ospreys are sometimes called “fish hawks” because of their fish-centric diets.
- Rhode Island, at one time, was down to only two nests in the state due to the impacts of pesticides like DDT.
- Ospreys can be found on every continent except Antarctica.
- Osprey’s talons are specially adapted with spicules (small, raised barbs) to grip slippery fish without dropping them.
- Osprey nests can be over twelve feet high and weigh several hundred pounds.
- Ospreys wear both a “mask”, a dark stripe on their face and a “necklace”, a brown speckling across their neck.



Osprey nest, USFWS

GET INVOLVED!

In 2010 RIDEM passed the Osprey Monitoring Program to the Audubon Society of Rhode Island. Nests are monitored from April to August and volunteers help to observe chicks, behaviors and to identify new nests.

For more information, or to volunteer visit:
<http://riosprey.info/>