

(Jarrett Wyant)



Pandionidae the OSPREY

The family Pandionidae is comprised of a single species: the Osprey. This raptor specializes in hunting and eating fish, and it is virtually cosmopolitan in its distribution around the globe. The Osprey is a large hawk, 23 inches long, which is about 4 inches bigger than our largest buteo, the Red-tailed Hawk. This bird is different than our other diurnal birds of prey. Osprey have a reversible toe and sharp spines on pads on their feet that help them grab and hold onto wriggling fish. Osprey are brown above and white below. They have a white crown and head with a black eye stripe, “crooked” wings that look angled in the air, and black wrist patches. They are regularly mistaken as Bald Eagles by many, but upon close observation the two can be easily distinguished.

Osprey are generally solitary birds that use the same nest site year after year. Their nests are large and heavy, made up of lots of sticks and are usually built in the top of a tall, dead tree near water. They are often seen hovering in the air over water and then plunging in a dive to catch a fish. They hold their fish with its head facing forward as they fly off to perch and feed. Bald Eagles will occasionally let an Osprey do the work of catching a fish, and then they will swoop down and rob them of their prey.

The Osprey is one of the birds that was most affected by the use of the chemical DDT. Small fish ate food with trace amounts of DDT, and the chemical built up in their bodies. The small fish were eaten by larger fish, and so on until the big fish were eaten by the Osprey. The effects of the chemical were magnified, and the end result was a toxic buildup in the Osprey that altered the metabolism of the bird and resulted in the thinning and breakage of its egg shells. Like the Brown Pelican and the Bald Eagle, the Osprey population plummeted because the birds could not successfully reproduce. Osprey populations in the Carolinas were decimated in the late 1950s and 1960s. After DDT was banned in 1973, their population began to slowly rebound. The breeding population in South Carolina has steadily increased since this time. In North Carolina it quickly rebounded in the 1970s and 1980s, and it was removed from the rare bird list in 1990.