

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*



Folk Name: Fish Hawk, Diving Hawk, Fish Eagle

Status: Breeder, Migrant, Winter Visitor

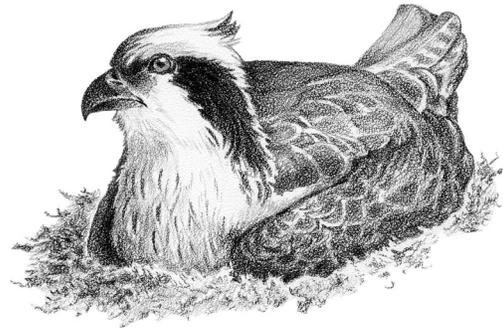
Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

Habitat: Open water habitats

In the nineteenth century, the Osprey was considered a “plentiful” summer breeder along the coast of both Carolinas. It was not found in the winter in either state, and it was only seen inland during migration. In the late 1800s, Leverett Loomis found Osprey in Chester County during migration along both the Broad and Catawba rivers, and he once saw one away from the rivers as it flew near the Chester Court House in downtown Chester.

In 1910, Arthur T. Wayne, South Carolina’s famous ornithologist, noted that Osprey had been reported breeding along the Catawba River corridor as far west as Morganton, North Carolina. He made this discovery while on a rare excursion away from Charleston and into western North Carolina. Wayne observed a mounted Osprey with a Yellow-billed Cuckoo in its talons on display in Leslie’s Drug Store in Morganton and was told that the bird “breeds regularly” along the river. In his account, published in the journal *The Auk*, he highlighted this portrayal of the Osprey’s prey with an exclamation mark, as the Osprey is almost exclusively a fish eater. Wayne did state that he had not personally seen an Osprey nest on the Catawba. Later, C.S. Brimley reported that the Osprey was “said to breed on the Catawba River” around 1910 and cited Wayne’s report.

In 1944, Elizabeth Clarkson reported the Osprey as a migrant in this region with “most records...for May and October,” and David Wray observed one in Hickory during migration on September 6, 1945. In May of 1956, observers scouring the river during the Charlotte Spring Bird Count were excited to see an Osprey fly overhead, providing the highlight of their day. An Osprey seen by Flo Cobey on the 1971 Charlotte Spring Bird Count was



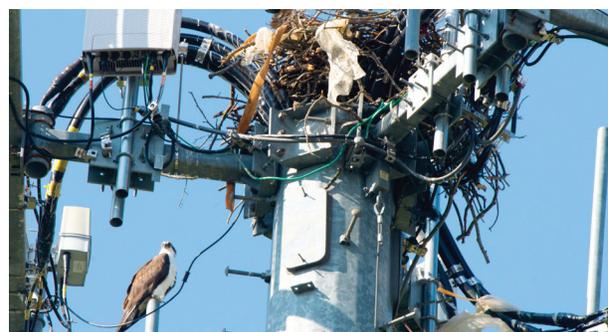
pronounced “an excellent find,” one was seen on the 1978 count “with a fish in its talons,” and one was a “surprise” on the 1982 count.

After the ban of DDT, expectations were high for birds to begin nesting in the Piedmont of the Carolinas. Despite repeated searches, there was no confirmation of nesting on large Piedmont reservoirs in the 1970s. In 1982, an “ambitious” hacking project was begun by Dick Brown at the Carolina Raptor Center in Huntersville. Six young Osprey were hacked that year at the Latta Plantation Nature Preserve on Mountain Island Lake. The following year, one bird was hacked on Davidson College property on Lake Norman, and in 1984, three birds were released at a Duke Power site on Lake Norman, and two were released on Mountain Island Lake. All of the young birds hacked were obtained from nests along the coast of North Carolina. Unfortunately, most of these young birds did not survive long enough to feed themselves, and at the end of the project “no more than three [were] expected to survive [to] return to breed.”

The first Osprey nest confirmed in the Piedmont of both Carolinas was finally located on Jordan Lake on May 6, 1984, and another was confirmed on Lake Townsend that year. Dick Brown located “several nests” on Lake



Osprey nest platform along Catawba River. (Bill Archer)



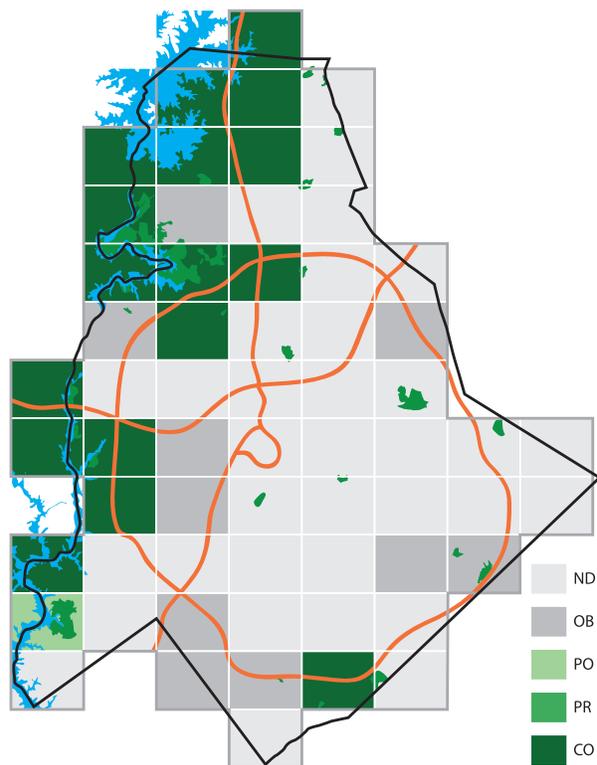
Osprey nest on a microwave tower at Davidson College. (Phil Fowler)

Norman in 1986 and two Osprey nests on Lake Norman in 1987. Brown found Osprey nesting at the Lake Norman dam in 1988, and they have regularly nested in this general area every year since. The breeding population in the Piedmont slowly grew, and, by 1989, Osprey were considered rare but regular breeders at large inland lakes in both Carolinas. Today, the Osprey population is doing quite well, and the large bulky nests of sticks built by Osprey are a regular sight along rivers and large reservoirs throughout the Carolina Piedmont.

Osprey have now been sighted in the region during every month of the year, and winter reports are increasing. However, they are still scarce from December through early February. Most now arrive here in late February or early March, and they remain active along our major lakes and rivers throughout spring, summer, and into early fall. Most have moved south by Halloween, but a few migrants have lingered into November. Our highest count is a group of 36 Osprey reported by a sailplane pilot in flight between Chester and Spartanburg, South Carolina, on April 17, 1991, at an elevation of 2,135 meters (7,005 feet).

Dr. Richard O. Bierregaard began research work with Osprey on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts in the 1970s. Around 2000, he began satellite tracking Osprey in New England. In 2002, he started tagging Osprey in the Carolinas. One bird, captured along the Catawba River in 2002, was named "Miss Charlotte." Bierregaard worked with students from Charlotte's Bruns Avenue Elementary School to monitor her movements from her nesting site on an island in the lake to her wintering site in South America and back again. In 2008 and 2009, he tagged two fledglings, "Duke" and "Buck," at Great Falls on the Catawba River. Duke was lost in Panama after a marathon crossing of the Caribbean Sea on his first migration south. Buck spent 18 months in Venezuela before returning to its breeding site. He arrived at the South Carolina coast in late April and then spent four

months wandering as far north as Massachusetts and as far west as Ohio in search of his nest area. He had covered over 8,000 miles before finally returning to Great Falls. By 2017, when Bierregaard finished his studies, he had tracked 108 Osprey captured at sites along the East Coast from Chesapeake Bay to Newfoundland, Canada. Details of these bird's amazing long-distance migration routes are online at www.ospreytrax.com.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/0, CO/17)