

The Nature of Merrickville - June 1, 2019 issue

There be Osprey!

In 2010, Hydro One erected an Osprey nesting pole just west of the beach in Merrickville. While poles across the river and downstream have had Osprey families living in them for years, this one has stood empty all this time. I began to wonder what was wrong with ours... Well wonder no more! The housing situation has changed and a new couple have moved into the neighbourhood. On May 14, I photographed the pair – she on the nest, he in the air, circling and peeping at me. They will eventually grow accustomed to human presence, though they may have to chase away Crows, Ravens and Blue Jays, as well as squirrels and other climbing omnivores that might predate their eggs. Meanwhile they, in turn, will get pestered by swallows and blackbirds if they fly too close to their territory.

Commonly known as 'fish hawks' Osprey need to nest near open water, where they can hunt for fish swimming near the surface. When the water gets too cold, the fish drop into the depths and the Osprey move south. I consulted *Friends of the Osprey* in Lindsay, Ontario, <https://friendsoftheosprey.org/osprey-facts/>. Any quotations you see in this article will be from that website. "They breed commonly in most areas of Canada and the United States and migrate up to 8000 km to South and Central America. [Evidently some spend their lives in warmer climates and do not migrate.] Osprey [who] breed in Canada [do so] between April and September. [They] are adaptable birds and are able to nest in natural and artificial structures close to water, including at the top of dead trees, hydro poles, duck blinds, microwave towers and navigation light towers respectively." Stew Hamill, my colleague in the Rideau Experience Voyageur Canoe program, has seen them in Florida nesting on channel markers, suggesting that they may settle for less lofty perches. Concerned citizens and conservation authorities began erecting nesting poles in the 80s to make up for the loss of tall trees to rural development for farming and urbanization. Tall straight Red Pines have been grown for decades for use as telephone and hydro poles. It is fitting that some of those felled trees should now return as Osprey nesting poles.

Osprey mate for life and most return to the same nests each year. The males seem to arrive first to prepare the nest (build, clean, repair). Some birds use a lichen to clean out nest parasites -- eagles do, not sure about Osprey. Since this is a brand new nest, I figure this pair are newlyweds. They were probably born nearby, like their respective parents before them. Maybe they met along their migration or upon arrival. If all goes well, they will rear 2 or 3 chicks. Mom will incubate the eggs for about 40 days, while dad does most of the fishing. "Chicks fledge in Mid-July when they are about 2 months old, however they remain close to the nesting site for another three weeks or so, depending on their parents for food." In the fall, the parents will leave first and the kids will be left to set out on their own life journey.

There are two species of Osprey worldwide. The species that summers here, *pandion haliaetus*, thrives all over the world, except in polar regions. Like eagles and other raptors, Osprey are 'apex predators' – meaning they are at the 'top of the food chain', which is really more of a web, but the chain or ladder image works. They are therefore seriously affected by toxins that 'bioaccumulate' up the food chain that sustains them. In the 50s, DDT was widely used to eradicate mosquitoes. The pesticide would cover more than just the insects and would easily find

its way into water bodies. Since bigger creatures eat lots and lots of smaller creatures, at every step up the food chain, more and more poisons are ingested, bio-accumulating in fatty tissues. Osprey, like eagles, were nearly wiped out because their prey were laced with DDT. The poison thinned their eggshells and chicks were lost. The populations began to collapse. When DDT was banned, the birds began to recover. However "persistent PCBs in the Kawartha Lakes watershed continue to be a threat." If Osprey successfully breed near you, the water they fish from is likely fairly clean.

If you see an Osprey fishing, notice how it carries its prey: nose or tail forward. "Their hunting abilities are quite dramatic, as they are able to dive [feet first] into the water from a height of up to 40 metres. Ospreys have sharp spines on the soles of their feet that enable them to grasp their prey...[then] their opposable outer toe is able to rotate [to carry the prey nose first] to allow for better aerodynamics while in flight." Stew also enjoys how they shake themselves off to dry their feathers, as they recover from their dive, prey in toe. So cool.

One last point: males and females are virtually identical in their markings, so you can't easily tell them apart. But as you observe them over time, it will become obvious who is who. I hope you will enjoy watching them as much as I do, either as you walk the track, paddle the shoreline or take in a sunset at the beach. One day, the Merrickville Trails Society will build a waterfront trail and boardwalk, so we can all get a little closer to the animals that live in our sanctuary. Let's welcome this new couple; may they thrive in their new home and return for years to come.

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