

# Life of an Osprey

HOW DID THEY EARN THE NICKNAME "FISH HAWK"?

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## FISHING MACHINE

Ospreys are raptors, birds that kill and eat other animals. Ospreys' favorite food is fish, and they do their fishing from the air. Although they can fly as fast as 40 miles an hour, they slow down to look for fish. An osprey will hover 50 to 200 feet above the water, and when it spots a fish, dive feet first, with its head forward and wings back. Often there's a big splash, and the tips of its wings are the last to disappear into the water.

Ospreys are designed to be very efficient fishing machines. Long, razor-sharp talons sink quickly into the fish. Ospreys' feet are covered with short, sharp spines, called spicules, which help them hold onto their slippery prey. Unlike other raptors, an osprey's outer toe is reversible so that the bird can grip with two toes forward and two toes back.

When it rises from the water with a fish in its talons, an osprey will pause and turn the fish around so it faces front forward. That lets the bird fly with the least amount of wind resistance as it brings food back to a perch or nest.

Most ospreys weigh about four pounds, and can carry a fish that weighs almost as much as they do.

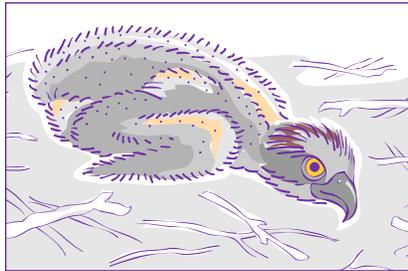
Ospreys are about the same size as eagles. They are 21 inches to 25 inches tall, with wingspans of 4.5 to 6 feet. The females are slightly larger than the males, and may have what looks like a dark speckled necklace. Otherwise the male and female look alike. They have dark brown backs with white bellies and heads. A dark stripe runs from their yellow eyes to the back of their heads.

## HOME SWEET HOME

A female osprey will choose her mate based on the quality and location of his nest. They usually mate for life, but if no offspring are produced, sometimes they choose another partner.

Ospreys like to nest close to their food – near streams, rivers or lakes. They like the tops of large trees or platforms built on utility poles. A pair will reuse the same nest, adding new material every year, sometimes for decades. Nests can become very large and heavy, made from all kinds of sticks, bones, corn stalks, and trash from the beaches. Some nests have been found to contain rag dolls and toy boats!

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### STARTING A FAMILY

Ospreys begin breeding when they are three years old. Mom will lay two to four eggs, and incubate, or sit on them, for four to five weeks. During this time, Dad will do the fishing and bring food back to the nest for her. Sometimes Dad takes a turn keeping the eggs warm. Osprey eggs are considered to be the prettiest of the hawk eggs. They are colored white to pink to cinnamon, with dark brown splotches.

The nestlings, or baby ospreys, emerge from their shells hungry. They will beg loudly for food. Dad brings home fresh fish that Mom will tear into pieces for the young. It's not unusual to see a little pushing and shoving as the nestlings try to get the most food.

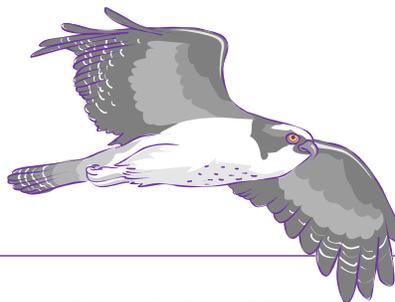
From May to July, you can watch an osprey family that nests at Xcel Energy's Allen S. King Plant in Oak Park Heights, Minnesota, along the St. Croix River.

Check out Osprey Cam during nesting season! Pictures of the nest are updated every two minutes and can be viewed on Xcel Energy's Web site: [www.xcelenergy.com](http://www.xcelenergy.com).



The parents will defend the nest aggressively, attacking anyone who comes too close.

By the time they are 10 weeks old, young ospreys have all their flight feathers. Soon afterwards, they make their first awkward flights. As fledglings they will practice flying, diving and fishing. To encourage the fledglings to leave the nest, parents may hold back food. Sometimes the fledglings visit neighboring nests, looking for free food brought by other parents.



### NESTING SEASON ON OSPREY CAM

By the way, the same power plant is also home for a peregrine falcon. Xcel Energy's Falcon Cam shows photos of her nest from mid-April through June. Peregrines and osprey are able to coexist peacefully because they do not compete for food or habitat.



### HEADING SOUTH FOR THE WINTER

North American ospreys head south to spend the winter in the Caribbean, South America, the Gulf Coast or Florida. Migration routes follow waterways, so the ospreys can catch the food they need for the journey. They return to their old nesting sites in the spring, arriving in the northern U.S. in March or April.

Ospreys suffered during the 1960s and 1970s because of the use of DDT and other pesticides, which weakened their eggs so much that no young were being born. But once DDT was banned in the U.S. in 1972, osprey populations began to recover, along with other birds of prey like falcons.

Some osprey may live for as long as 20 or 30 years.