

Ospreys on the Golf Course

Editors Note: We start our second year of running the "Wildside" feature by Craig Weyandt, which serves as part of his environmental education and outreach to his club members by writing monthly articles for his club's newsletter. He gets lots of positive feedback and interest from his members. We encourage you to share these stories and your own observations and photos with your club members as a means of educating the golfers and public about the environmental benefits of golf courses.

By Craig Weyandt

Returning to work after the hurricanes in September 2004 we found the golf course a mess. Trees were down, debris everywhere, the bunker sand was gone and water damage was visible throughout the course. While the staff and I were busy doing the clean up I would stop every so often to check around for wildlife. At first there was not much to see. I think the smaller the animal was, the faster the return. I don't know if that was true; it was just my observation.

One bird that we did notice in its return was the osprey; not only because of its size but there were many more ospreys after the storm then before the storm. Sometimes I could count as many as 20 at one time from the No. 6 tee.

I believe that there were more ospreys after the storm because their nests were blown down and they were looking for new nesting sites or because there just happened to be an abundant amount of food in the area. Either way, it was nice to see so many around the golf course. I hope the following information helps you enjoy this bird as much as I do.

Flight and Hunting

Ospreys are fish hawks that have brown and white markings on their bellies. They can soar on wind currents, but most of their flight is with wings flapping actively. Ospreys hunt by flying over the water looking for fish. They hover before diving



An Osprey perches on a hurricane battered mangrove near the 6th tee at The Moorings Club. Photo by Craig Weyandt.

towards the water, then plunge in feet-first. Mullet are a good prey fish in Florida because they school, swim in shallow water, and are rich in fat.

Ospreys usually hunt alone during early morning and late afternoon. Ospreys that are not parents need to catch one to three fish a day. A breeding male, who must fish for two or three babies and a mate, has to catch six to eight fish a day.

Ospreys have special adaptations that make them better fish-hunters. For one thing, the bottoms of their feet have many short spines that help them to hang onto a slimy fish. Many birds have three toes and a thumb, but the osprey can turn his third toe around, so he can have an extra-strong grip with two fingers and two thumbs. Ospreys have extremely sharp talons and a strong hooked beak for tearing fish into bite-sized pieces. They also have very oily feathers that help keep them dry when they splash into the water.

Nesting and raising young birds

Ospreys like to make their nests in dead trees because there are no leaves to get in the way of their wings. It is also harder for predators to climb a dead tree without the osprey seeing it. Many ospreys

build nests on power poles when there aren't enough dead trees around.

Ospreys are able to mate at 3 years old. When a male is ready to court a female, he performs the "sky dance" by flying around with a newly-caught fish or nesting material. Ospreys mate for life, and mated pairs come back to the same nest year after year.

If the pair has no nest, they both collect materials, like sticks and grass. Sometimes they also pick up plastic bags and fishing wire (which can kill the young). Year after year, the ospreys make these nests bigger and stronger so they won't get knocked down by high winds. An osprey nest can weigh up to 1,000 pounds, but it is not very deep inside and probably could not hold a person. Florida ospreys stay in Florida year round and lay their eggs between December and February. North of Florida, ospreys migrate south each year.

The eggs are about the same size as a chicken egg. They are cream-colored with spots. Both parents sit on the eggs. The mother does most of the sitting, and the father feeds her. Ospreys usually lay three eggs. When there isn't much food, the larger babies will peck at the smallest baby so they can get first chance at the food. There is a good chance this runt will die of starvation.

Young ospreys will practice flapping their wings 10-15 days before fledging (flying). They jump up and down on the nest until a wind gust carries them over the edge on their first flight. Osprey parents will fly past the nest with a fish and drop it into the water to help the babies catch their first fish. The babies can usually catch their own fish two or three days after fledging, but the parents will still bring food for a few weeks.

These fish hawks are a threatened species and protected by law in Florida.

References

Poole, Allen. Ospreys: A Natural and Unnatural History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1989.

Terres, John K., The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of N. American Birds. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1987.

Information provided by the E. Dale Joyner Nature Preserve at Pelotes Island near Jacksonville, 904-665-8856, <http://pelotes.jea.com>.