



Osprey – The Bay’s Fishing Eagle

What are they?

Ospreys are birds of prey. That means that they are birds that hunt and kills their food. Scientists also refer to them as raptors. The word raptor comes from a Latin word that means “to seize, or grab.” These kinds of birds seize their prey.

What do they look like?

Ospreys are known as fish hawks or fishing eagles, because of the way they look and the way they act. They are actually related to these other large birds.

They are sizeable birds, with two-foot long bodies. When they stretch out their wings, they can be as long as five feet across. Some of them can be even larger, with longer wingspans. If you looked at a male and female osprey together, you would notice that the female is larger than the male.

They have long, sharp talons. Talons are sharp, curved claws (the osprey’s toenails). Ospreys have brown backs and wings, with white feathers on their undersides.

Where can you find them?

Ospreys spend the fall and winter in the Caribbean South America. When they return to the Chesapeake area in the spring, ospreys can be found throughout the region, near the Bay’s shallow waters and rivers.

How do they behave?

These raptors hunt for food, using two general patterns. In one pattern, they fly along the surface of the water and scoop up fish swimming near the top of the water. In the other pattern, they soar high above the Bay. Once they spot a fish, they tuck their wings and dive directly into the water. Sometimes they go completely underwater. Once they capture the prey, they fly to a perch. Along the way, they rearrange the fish with their talons so that it is facing forward. That makes it easier for the osprey to fly holding the fish. They do not generally drink water. Evidently, the fish they eat supply all the water they need.

Ospreys like to build their nests offshore on tall structures such as channel markers. That way, their young are protected and they are near the source of their food. Their nests can be as large as four or five feet across.

What do they eat?

Ospreys only eat fish. They prefer medium sized fish, between six and 10 inches long.

What eats them?

Raccoons, snakes, and eagles prey on very young osprey when they are in their nests. Adult ospreys are considered to be at the top of their food chain and have very few enemies.

Creature Feature

In the 1960s, the number of osprey in the Chesapeake region had dropped a great deal. Pesticides such as DDT had entered the water as runoff from farms and gardens. These pesticides traveled through the food chain, from plankton to fish to the ospreys that ate the fish. These poisons caused the shells of osprey eggs to be very thin. Normally, ospreys only have two or three babies a year. But the thinned shells meant that even fewer baby ospreys were hatched.

The U.S. banned DDT use in 1972. Slowly but surely, the osprey population began to grow. Now, there are about 2,000 nesting pairs of osprey in the Chesapeake area.



Photo Source: Bay.net

