



Photos by Dr. Gordon Ellmers, Jr.

Dr. Gordon Ellmers, Jr is a world renowned photographer who owns the Fort Edward Animal Hospital.

The Osprey, Hudson River's Greatest Angler

By Gil Hawkins

Back when birds were recognized by their diets or habitat, the Osprey was commonly called river hawk, sea hawk or fish hawk. Our western osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) is not a hawk, it is a subspecies of its own genus osprey and is a rather unique bird. It is a large raptor often mistaken for a bald eagle. Having a wingspan of more than 71 inches, or six feet, and perched it stands two feet tall. It is brown and gray with white under markings on its body and wings. It has a mostly white head with a dark stripe through its eye giving it the appearance of white crown.

One can easily identify an osprey by the crook in its wings when it is soaring. The "bend in the elbows" and long rather thin wings easily distinguishes it from the flat and broad wings of the eagle. Like the eagle, the only distinguishing gender difference is that the female is about one third larger than the male and first year birds have larger flight feathers making them appear larger than the adults.

As much as the osprey is compared to the bald eagle, their weights are significantly different, a fact that will play into my experiences later. The Eagle weighs close to 10 pounds or more and the osprey only 3.5 or one third that offer national symbol! Its common names did get one thing right and that is FISH. The osprey is built for fishing! It eats only fish. Eagle's are more like vultures in their diets. The osprey has made a tremendous comeback from avian diseases, pollution and habitat loss. Nesting platforms have been constructed in wetlands and tidal marshes all over North America. It seems like everyone on the river has an osprey story so here are a few of mine.

It wasn't too long ago that seeking and osprey was a rare occasion. Several years ago I joined a group of bird watchers at State Line Lookout in Alpine, Nj. The lookout is in The Palisades Interstate Park on the cliffs and offers a great view of the fall raptor migration. From our perch we can see up to the Tappan Zee Bridge and down past Yonkers and affords us the ability to look down and up at passing birds. In the past several years through conservation and laws, bunker (menhaden) have come into the Hudson in large schools. Ospreys feed on the bunker as they work their way south. IN 2011 the total osprey count for the year (10 weeks) was 445 birds. This years (2018) count for the month of September alone (4 weeks) has been 794 birds! It is not unusual to see an osprey with a fish taking it "to go" as they fly south.

Ospreys are supreme anglers. Soaring over the water, they fly in circles using their great eyesight to locate a hapless school close to the surface, In an instant they drop to the water talons armed for the snatch sometimes hating the water. With their quarry thoroughly skewered they have to work hard to get airborne. Note, most raptors talons are designed to grip and not let go. There have been stories of ospreys tackling a bunker too big and drowning though I haven't witnessed such a situation. As the bird works to get airborne with a not so happy bunker, it is vulnerable to another danger. The bald eagle is an opportunist. Many time I have seen an eagle fly down and attack an osprey trying to steal its prize. Many times the osprey's defense is to bare its talons and drop its dinner into the drink. The eagles bullying tactic gets it an easy meal. Ospreys are not push overs though and will go after the heavier eagle in a scramble over the Hudson. They are known to cut the head off of their fish and face them forward to make their burden more streamlined. When not migrating resident birds will go back to the same perch in a tree or on a pole to eat. Once while walking in the woods far away from any known waterway, I found a slew of partially eaten carp under a tree. I surmised that it was the work of a sloppy osprey.

As I mentioned Ospreys migrate out of the Hudson River area in the fall. Sightings are rare in November. As the winter winds chill and fish become less available, they follow the food. They will return in the spring to remind us that they are the Hudson River's greatest anglers.

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