

Osprey

Pandion haliaetus

Chicago is home to an extraordinary variety of wildlife. Many of these animals depend upon the Chicago River and the parks and forests that buffer it to provide all that is necessary for their survival, including food and shelter. Some of our regional predators such as coyotes, hawks, and falcons range over a wide area and require a varied diet. When that's not available, survival is threatened, such as in the case of the wolf, bobcat, cougar, and other extirpated predators.

The osprey, a once common predator of the Great Lakes region, lives exclusively in elevated platform nests above water throughout its range. Fish make up 99% of the osprey's diet and they are very adept at catching them. Osprey will swoop and dive to catch fish with reversible outer talons, closable nostrils to keep out water during dives, sharp spines and backwards-facing scales on the talons which act as barbs to help hold its catch.

Ospreys all but vanished from Illinois over 60 years ago due to habitat loss and pesticide exposure. Widespread pollution in the 1950s and '60s devastated the osprey, which survive almost solely on fish such as bass and other native local fish. The pesticide DDT, not banned until 1972, was especially damaging because it thinned eggshells to the point that the young could not survive. DDT and other contaminants also killed fish, depriving the osprey of food, and fish that did survive passed toxic substances on to the osprey.

Along with the removal of DDT, another factor in the osprey's comeback is the installation of nesting platforms. Since 1999 the Forest Preserve District has installed over a dozen. They are affixed to the top of telephone poles and offer a view of the surrounding area that ospreys require to build a nest. The platforms also provide a safe place to raise their young away from scavenging raccoons, which can climb trees, and high winds that could blow nests to the ground. These platforms a key to the osprey's return and more need to be installed.

With more people being aware of how their everyday actions can affect the river, the osprey and other predators have a chance. As Friends partners the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to increase fish populations (see page seven), we are also indirectly aiding many other species, such as otter, eagle and, of course, osprey.

Osprey Fun Facts:

- An osprey may log more than 160,000 migration miles during its 15-to-20-year lifetime.
- When flying with prey, an osprey lines up its catch head first for less wind resistance.
- Ospreys catch fish on about one in every four dives, and have success rates sometimes as high as 70%.
- Osprey eggs do not hatch all at once. They hatch over several days, in a determined sequence. Older chicks monopolize the food brought by the parents. If food is abundant, chicks share meals in relative harmony; in times of scarcity, younger ones may starve to death.
- The name "osprey" literally means "bird of prey" and is from the Latin phrase *avis prede*.

Friends of the Chicago River

