

OSPREYS IN ORIENT

ROY LATHAM

Part 1 — 1956

The Long Island Naturalist 1956, page 22, printed an item by me entitled "Notes on Ospreys." The present article is in part, a sequel to that record:

In 1956 the male osprey arrived first to the site, on March 26, drifting in from the south at 8 a. m. and perched on the branch where the nest had been. The bird was evidently quite fatigued and remained nesting until 3 p. m., when it left the tree and circled out over the bay, plunging for a flounder, which it brought back to the same branch and devoured. The bird left the limb again about 5 p. m. and flew south over the bay. It was not seen again for three days. On March 29 it returned in company with the mate. One wonders if the male osprey sometimes returns south to meet the female en route. The male normally arrives before or with the female. The females always commence repairing the old nests, or start the construction of new nests.

When they arrived together (this spring), both stopped in the same tree where the male had stopped three days before. They were seen far out over the bay in a direct course for that tree, where they perched and nested for over an hour. Then the female circled the site several times. Taking in the situation, she quickly formed a decision and immediately dropped into a nearby cornfield. Picking up a cornstalk, she carried it to the old nest, where she had lost her young the two previous seasons to marauding raccoons. Thereafter she made a trip every fifteen to twenty minutes, carrying cornstalks to the nest. About twelve minutes were spent each trip arranging the material on the nest. The nest was below the top of the tree and the stalks were five to six feet in length. On nearly every trip the bird had to circle the tree several times before she could get the long stems between the branches to the nest. At 4 p. m. she rested on the before-mentioned branch for nearly an hour, and then went after a flounder, which was brought back to the perch and eaten. She did not leave the branch again that day. The male also spent the night in the same tree. During the period of finishing up the nest, the male spent most of his time loafing and fishing. On the second day the female started breaking weak branches and twigs from trees a quarter mile distance from the nest. One windy day she was carrying a long strip of cloth low over the woods, and the end of the rag caught in a branch. The bird was jerked to a sudden stop and whirled over, head downward, all swinging in the high wind. The bird had great difficulty extricating itself from the rags among the branchlets. It was feared that wing or leg, or even the neck, would be broken in the struggle to release itself. She finally succeeded and flew straight to the nest and relaxed. No further attempt was undertaken to secure the rag, and it hung there throughout the summer.

In due time a set of eggs was laid, incubated and hatched. About mid-June raccoons again visited the nest and took the nestlings for the third successive season. As in former years, the ospreys left the vicinity for three weeks. They returned in July and erected a new nest on the very branch

where they had been the preceding year. The nest was completed in about twenty days. Thereafter this pair of ospreys loitered around until their departure for the south early in September.

The ospreys are extremely methodical birds, especially in their nesting activities. Their arrival varies only slightly by a few days, according to the weather. Exceptionally in very severe spells of weather, they return southward or at least disappear from Orient for a few days.

It takes them three to four weeks to fix up an old nest, as long as it does to build a complete, new nest. They work all day, every fair day, adding material to the old nest, which in most cases is suitable for eggs at the start. As I have stated before, they do not build on rainy days. The female spends more and more time on the nest as April advances, and in Orient the first eggs are laid April 28 to May 4. Usually two to four days elapse between laying each egg. The bird does not settle down to steady incubating until the last egg of a clutch is laid.

It is recorded that the osprey colony in Orient is an off-shoot from Gardiner's Island. This I believe to be an error, from my studies of the Orient ospreys over a long period of years, together from data from older residents in Orient dating back to at least 1800. Some of these old people expressed an interest and knowledge of the ospreys, and I acquired as much as possible of that information.

My records show that the ospreys began to multiply in Orient around 1890, at the time when Plum Island was sold and the Government started construction of the fortifications on the island. Large crews of laborers were transferred to the island, with their keen appetites for ospreys' eggs. It was then that the ospreys commenced to spread to Orient, Shelter Island, Gardiner's Island and other localities.

We read in the *Auk*, October, 1892, "Breeding Habits of the Fish Hawks on Plum Island" by Charles Slover Allen, with two photographs, a most interesting and instructive narrative of the ospreys on that island. He states that for 40 years prior to 1885 the fish hawks on the island had been protected and encouraged to nest there by the owner. They were never molested and were "almost as tame as German Storks." They nested in the home yard and all over the island and on rocks along the shores, certain nests having been in yearly service for at least 40 years. At that time, according to Allen, the owner claimed that 500 nests were on the island. (Allen considered that one-half that number was a reasonable estimation.) About half the nests were on or close to the ground. The owner claimed that two thousand ospreys roosted on the island every night, but it was not said if this was early in the season or later, when the young ospreys were flying. Plum Island was sold in 1885. All of these low accessible nests were exposed to whomsoever desired to destroy them or their contents. Marine trap fishermen, among others, held a deadly grudge against them. Allen wrote "After the island was sold and protection removed, the ospreys in most part have gone elsewhere to nest." From my knowledge it was at that period that the influx appeared in Orient. Two well-posted bird men on Shelter Island, Willis W. Worthington and Moses B. Griffin, told me later that there was an increase in the osprey population of that island at that time.

Benjamin K. Mulford of Orient, who died in his 99th year, was the

largest land owner in Orient. On his farm in 1890 was the only pair of ospreys in Orient and for 50 years prior to that date, as he related to me. He was very jealous of them and allowed no one to disturb them. They nested in an old red cedar, long before 1890 and after, until the tree was ripped apart in the hurricane of 1938. According to Mr. Mulford, and what had been transferred to him by others, there had been but one pair of breeding ospreys in Orient, at least back to 1800. This old nest was in sight from my home and five minutes walk away. I recall clearly one instance of my very young years. I found a young osprey on the ground under that nest, too immature to fly. As I knelt to examine the fledging, both parents swooped, striking me with sufficient force to knock me to the ground. The old birds dashed repeatedly at me as I ran with blood trickling from face and hands. They followed me for a hundred yards. In all my experience with this species it is the only time they attacked me with viciousness. It may have been because of my small size, they mistaking me for some other type of small mammal. When one is at the nest which has young, the old ospreys, usually the females, frequently sweep close to one, the wings sometimes brushing one, the talons vibrating close to one's head. Once my hat was hooked off my head and dropped into Gardiner's Bay — on an off-shore wind. Such instances are reminiscences of pleasant days afield. It is apparently the long-time nesting individuals which show vigorous combative nature when young are in the nest.

Prior to the peak of osprey breeding in Orient no raccoons had been recorded in the vicinity for about 60 years. It is now a common and increasing mammal in Orient. It is an excellent climber, and all nests are accessible to it.

The osprey colony in Orient attained its maximum number of breeding pairs in 1926. Thirty-two nests were occupied. This number continued with slight fluctuation for twenty years, when a decrease was noticed. In 1956 less than half that number nested in Orient.

Part II — 1957 - 1958

1957 — The first osprey of the season, apparently a male, came in over the bay at 10 a. m. on March 25. It circled the old nest three times and then alighted upon it and rested for sixty-five minutes. It then flew off over the bay and was not seen again that day. On March 26 an osprey came to the nest just before dark, perched on a branch outside the nest and spent the night there. At dawn it flew to the bay to fish and soon returned, with a flounder, to the same perch. This bird, apparently a female, left the perch at 8:15 after eating the fish, and brought back a small branch to the old nest and sat there for fifty-five minutes. She then flew a half-mile and picked up off the ground an old burlap fertilizer sack and brought it to the nest. There was no sign of the mate all that day. On March 29 both birds were at the newer nest early in the morning. On that date they selected that nest and rapidly put it in order for laying and were successful in bringing up three off-spring to the flying age.

1958 — The spring was late and the first osprey to this nest arrived April

10, both birds coming in together about midmorning, the female going to the old nest again and the male bird to the newer nest. At once the female began repairing the old nest in earnest. However, on the second morning, perhaps because the mate concentrated there all the while, she took material to the newer nest, but she had not condemned the old nest yet and commenced to repair both nests, making trips alternately first to the old nest, then to the newer nest. Only once did she vary from this pattern. Once when she was about to land on the old nest with claws full of seaweed for the finishing touches, I appeared too close and she whirled off and took the lining material to the other nest and deposited it there. Both nests were built up equally during the three weeks following their arrival with no clue to the last which nest would be selected for the summer occupancy. Both nests were ready for eggs late in April. The first egg was laid in the newer nest on April 27, an early date by one day in Orient. From that day on the old nest was abandoned by the female, but the male perched there frequently. The eggs hatched early in June. Two weeks later the young disappeared and the adults left the nest and vicinity. Positive evidence is not recorded as to what became of the young in this case.

As usual the ospreys returned to the nest again late in July and added more material to it before their departure from Orient late in August.

Putting two nests in order at the same time for laying is a new experience in my long observation with the ospreys in Orient.

Orient, N. Y.