



BACK RIVER TRAIL

Osprey Overlook Park

Osprey: the King of Birds

Pandion haliaetus, better known as Osprey or Fish Hawks, have made a strong recovery since the 1970s when they were near the brink of extinction in Massachusetts. After World War II, the pesticide DDT (now illegal) devastated local populations until fewer than 10 nesting pairs were documented across the state in 1970. DDT was banned in 1972 and positive results were observed almost immediately. Osprey can now be found from Cape Cod to the Connecticut River Valley soaring above shorelines, patrolling waterways, and standing on their huge stick nests. The Back River is home to multiple osprey pairs, which return every spring to hatch new chicks. Approximately 40% of the species' population in Massachusetts can be found on Cape Cod and the Islands.

Osprey are raptors, meaning birds of prey, and are a species of large, distinctly shaped hawk that can be identified by their gleaming white heads, sharply hooked black beaks, and (from below) white-patterned feathers with prominent dark patches on the wrist of each wing. Osprey are easy to spot when sitting atop a nest or perch and are a picture of concentration while hunting. They search for food by flying over relatively shallow water, often hovering briefly before diving, feet first, to grab a fish. Ospreys fly with a distinct kink in their wings, making an M-shape when seen from below. An osprey's call sounds like a chirp or whistle.



Photograph taken, and used with permission, by Jason Peterson, Friends of Great Esker Park.



Photograph taken, and used with permission, by Carol Smith

"I have by me one of a pair of ospreys, which have for some years fished in this vicinity, shot by a neighboring pond, measuring more than two feet in length, and six in the stretch of its wings. [...] Its shrill scream seems yet to linger in its throat, and the roar of the sea in its wings. There is the tyranny of Jove in its claws, and his wrath in the erectile feathers of the head and neck."

- **Henry David Thoreau** in
Natural History of Massachusetts, 1842

Nesting above the Salt Marshes of the Back River

Osprey are often found near water bodies as their diet consists almost exclusively of live fish (99 percent). The Back River is particularly productive for osprey due to its strong herring run—one of the few sources of food for osprey in the early spring. In fact, a healthy osprey population is considered a strong indicator of healthy, productive fisheries, which in turn mean productive estuaries and bay waters.

Like many Massachusetts bird species, osprey are tree-nesters meaning they build and spend their resting time in nests high above the ground, often over water. Their conspicuous stick nests are often constructed atop dead trees, channel markers, cell or radio towers, and even utility poles. In effort to attract nesting pairs to the Back River, several manmade towers have been maintained in the salt marshes since the 1990s, providing safe places for the birds to raise newborn chicks.

Osprey mate for life and will return to their nesting sites year after year. Typically they arrive in Massachusetts in late March or early April. The males gather sticks and other materials (grass or seaweed, for example) to construct the nests while the females complete the actual construction. A nest can be as large as four feet across and three feet deep. Hatching typically occurs in late May or early June. Come September, the birds leave Massachusetts to migrate as far south as Brazil, spending their winters in South America. Osprey make this trip in about two to three weeks.



Information from Massachusetts Audubon Society and the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology where additional information on osprey and other birds of Massachusetts can be found.