



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

August 5, 2022



Photo by Cambria Wells

The Diving Raptor

If you've ever spent time along the shallow waters and inlets of the Southern California coast, there is a good chance that you've spotted an Osprey. Ospreys are unique among large raptors (birds of prey), as their diet consists almost entirely of fish (about one percent of their diet can be made up of reptiles, birds, amphibians, crustaceans, and small mammals). They have striking plumage with dark brown feathers on their back and flight feathers, a white underside, and a distinct dark eye stripe that extends along their head and neck. Compared to the more commonly seen Red-tailed Hawks whose wingspan is four to five feet, the Osprey's wingspan is up to six feet. These sizeable birds can be found along water sources across the United States and on all continents except Antarctica.



Photo by Jennifer Brent

Ospreys have been in existence for at least 11 million years, and they have developed quite a few unique characteristics that sets them apart from other raptor species. The talons on the feet of Ospreys are more curved than other raptors which enables them to easily pierce through fish, and the bottoms of their feet have small spines that helps them grip their slippery prey. The most interesting aspect of Osprey feet is that the outer digit is able to rotate backwards to help them carry fish during flight. This rotation enables the bird to angle their prey with the head facing forward, which is the most aerodynamic orientation.

Although the Osprey conservation status is currently listed as that of Least Concern, that was not always the case. The wide use of pesticides in the 1950's caused a population crash. The poisons thinned the eggshells which caused offspring to perish. In the United States, up to 90% of breeding pairs disappeared between the 1950's and the 1972 DDT ban. After the ban populations started to recover, and today there is an estimated global breeding population of 1.2 million.



Photo by Jennifer Brent

While Ospreys are no longer considered endangered, they still face quite a few challenges living alongside human populations. Many of their nest sites have been destroyed due to tree removal and development of shorelines. An unfortunate cause of death are chicks who become tangled in twine and plastics (ocean trash) that parents inadvertently use as nesting materials. They also must cope with decreasing food sources and navigating other man-made obstacles.



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This was the case for a young male Osprey who was recently admitted to CWC. In the middle of July, a member of the public found the animal by the road in Woodland Hills, unable to fly. They carefully contained the large raptor and brought him to CWC. Upon the initial examination, technicians quickly noticed that the patient was suffering from trauma that was likely caused by colliding with a car. He had a broken right coracoid bone (near the base of the neck) and a significant amount of fresh blood in the mouth. Luckily the Osprey did not have any other major injuries.

Many times, when animals come to our facility with broken bones, surgical intervention is needed. For this particular case, the best course of action is to limit the Osprey's mobility so that the bone can heal naturally. He is currently in a small outdoor enclosure that prohibits any attempt at flight. It is critical that the Osprey stays grounded for the time being since use of the wing could potentially cause irreversible damage to his broken bone. Over the next couple weeks staff will continue to monitor his progress and he will eventually be placed in a larger enclosure to assess his flight capabilities. The road to recovery is not over for the Osprey, but CWC is doing everything we can to hopefully return this unique raptor back to the wild.

If you find an injured raptor, contact your local wildlife rehabilitation center for advice. It is possible to safely contain these birds of prey, but only do so under the guidance of professionals.