



An Osprey Family Album

by Milton Moody

These photos were taken along the Provo River near Utah Lake in Provo, Utah between the 2nd of July and the 31st of August 2003.

Using a man-made platform at the top of a pole in an open field, a pair of Ospreys accumulated nesting materials and set about starting a family. Sometime in late May or early June the female laid some nice-looking white to pink or cinnamon eggs heavily blotched and spotted with dark brown and began the incubation process which takes a little over a month of pretty much constant sitting. The male's job is to feed the female while she keeps the eggs at the right temperature until they hatch. This could explain why the female is slightly larger than the male, though it's not clear whether it would be from the male being over-worked or the female having a bit more sedentary roll in the family.



Photos from July 2nd

After the "big sit," three chicks emerged from their shells and found that they were hungry after being balled up for so long and having nothing but yolk to sustain themselves. Having placed the nest



strategically by the fish-laden Provo River and Utah Lake, it didn't take the male but a minute or two to swoop down, plunge head- and feet-first into the water, grab a fish with its special barbed pad on the soles of its feet, adjust the fish so the head is pointing forward to decrease the air resistance and fly back to the waiting new-born chicks and their vigilant mother.

[Note two of the chicks, hardly visibly, huddling together by their mother].



According to the report of a local primate (*Homo sapiens*) living near by, the mother Osprey spent hours shading the young Ospreys from the unusually hot summer sun. With her wingspan of typically around 5 feet , she would be able to provide enough shadow for the vulnerable chicks for several weeks before they mature a bit.

Photos from July 8th



A steady supply of food must be provided for the young birds who will fledge just under two months after hatching.



Already becoming more independent, the little one practices his fierce raptor stare which is starting to look quite convincing.

Photos from July 14th



The chicks are starting to bulk up and feather out--not looking quite so baffled and intimidated.



The space in the nest being limited, the male spends a lot of his time keeping watch from a nearby pole. He drops in regularly to bring a fish for dinner and pops in every now and then just for a visit.

Photos from July 20th



With his fast-growing wings and tail, the young chick has to figure out what to do with these changing appendages. Here he is try the famous Karate pose, "The Crane." [Which could be called "The Osprey" if performed on two feet instead of one].



Still the grown-ups must feed the chicks, day after day, until they are able to fly and learn how to catch fish for themselves.



The young are looking more and more like the adults, but they still have a long way to go.

Photos from July 23rd



Besides screeching her warning, the Mother bolts from the nest, flying in an intimidating manner towards intruders, circling over head, still squawking and sometimes dropping excreta bombs. The message is pretty obvious to any creatures with eyes or ears.



Meanwhile the youngsters are getting used to the daily routine.

- (yawn) "Hey, what's for breakfast?"
- "Fish, duhh!"
- "Fish is good! Fish is good!"



Taking a break from the family duties, the lady of the house visits a nearby pole and with a shake of the body, reminiscent of a dog's shake after it's been petted, she adjusts her plumage and tidies up.

Photos from July 29th



The Mother is still bringing sticks and softer bits of brush to the nest. Is she teaching her kids how to make a nest or just tending to her house-keeping chores?



The chick flaps its strong-looking wings as the Mother "weaves" the newly acquired stick into the loose fabric of the nest.

Photos from August 1st



The growing chick observes the Mother carefully as he waits patiently for her to "prepare the food."



He bends low to receive the filleted fish. It looks like the Mother is used to feeding a much smaller bird.



Meanwhile the male enjoys his meal on a "private" pole not far off.

Photos from August 5th



Leaving the "chicks" alone in the nest, more and more, the Mother keeps watch from a couple of poles down the way. From the side, front and back, the young Ospreys are looking more like adults. The red color of the eyes and the flecks of white on the upperparts betray their youth.



Because of the limited space on the nest platform, the three youths take turns doing their "exercises:" There's the wing spread and flap...



there's the bounce and flap...



and there's the jump and flap exercises.

They try the eight-inch vertical jump, going up and down and they try the two foot horizontal jump going from one edge of the nest to the other and of course there's always a lot of flapping involved.

They look almost good to go!

Photos from August 13th



According to reports, the young Ospreys took flight on the 12th of August. Here's one of them flying from the nest the next morning.



Less than 2 months after hatching, the young fledgling has left the nest and with a look of confidence, is ready to face the wide open world. ("Ignorance is bliss" -- looks pretty calm with several thousand "gigavolts" of electricity coursing between the talons).



Although they have the new freedom of flight, they still return to the nest to eat the fish provided by the parents. Here, one youth still wants to be fed and the other accommodates by sharing a morsel or two with the insistent sibling.



After breakfast in the nest, one of the Osprey youth makes a visit to a sibling who has been perched on the same pole for several hours. Is it the old panic attack problem? There's an abundance of moral support with the visiting sibling, and two parents and another sibling within easy eyeshot.

Photos from August 16th



All three youths have their own fish for breakfast, but each is eating with a different style and intensity.



Although Mom has been perching further and further away from the nest and Dad is off gallivanting somewhere, the young Ospreys still get a reassuring visit from their folks now and then. The Mom is keeping an eye out and the kids are chowing down -- they're all doing their jobs as they should.

Photos from August 19th



"I don't know about you, but I'm eating out."
The fish was repositioned and locked into the talons, then flown off to a shady hideaway (two poles down by some trees) for a private dining moment.



Teetering on the very edge of the plank with one foot and trying to nibble on the fish held with the other foot, doesn't quite do the job. A little leverage is definitely needed here.



With the fish tight under foot, the prospects look much better.



Okay! That's much better. Now there's all kinds of leverage!

Photos from August 22nd



The young Ospreys are out and about. They're flying over the houses in a nearby subdivision, flying to perch in far away trees and flying out of sight to who knows where. The Mom brings a fish for breakfast and lands on a near by pole and starts calling. After waiting for a few minutes with no response, she calls again. This time one of the kids comes back to the nest and starts calling along with the Mother. After a few minutes, a second wandering child flies in.



With two kids ready for breakfast the Mother delivers the goods to the young fledgling who are doing their regular "hungry refugee" routine (note the hunched shoulders and pathetic needy-looking faces) that has worked pretty well so far. The Mother leaves the fish to the hungry crew and retreats an appropriate distance to a pole where she can give the kids their space and yet keep her eye on them.



While one youth eats the other keeps up the "come-n-eat" call to the third sibling.



Finally the third bird, shows up to complete the trio. The Mom keeps an eye on them and they keep an eye on each other, as it should be in a food Osprey family.

Photos from August 25th



This morning breakfast is initiated by the fledgling Ospreys. First one youth comes to the nest and starts calling the others. In moments, a second youth comes in for a landing and joins in the call for the third. In very short order all three are on the nest calling for food. Like clock work the Mother comes in with a fish (she's been waiting patiently with a fish, on a remote pole).



The two dominate sibling "decide" which will eat first, while the third is still calling for more fish.

After a brief rest on a nearby pole the Mother takes off and in a couple of minutes returns with a second fish.



Now there are two fish and three Osprey fledglings -- a third fish will NOT be forthcoming. Two of the siblings are busily eating while the third seems to be waiting patiently (and silently), knowing there's plenty to go around.

Photos from August 31st



Tragedy strikes the Osprey family. On the favorite pole of the "timid sibling" hangs a young osprey who died at less than three months of age. This is probably the one who ate last, who spent time away from the others on this nearby pole, and who was the most ardent to call the siblings together for their meals -- the shy one.



Still clutching the electric wire with one set of talons and a fish with the other, the young Osprey tells a story of a life cut short in this beautiful yet dangerous world.

The mother Osprey sits on a pole at the other side of the field, facing away, while another sibling eats a fish on a distant pole. The two others were no where to be seen. The human photographer didn't stay long. He packed up his gear and went home.

The End

Appendix – Changing Chick Profile



June 2



June 8



June 14



June 20



June 26



August 1



August 7



August 13



August 19



August 25

Picture from the 28th and 31st of August show little change.

A bit about Ospreys:

(Mostly from: "*The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*" by John K. Terres)

- ! The Osprey is also known by several other names: fish eagle, fish hawk, fishing eagle and sea hawk (scientific name *Pandion haliaetus*).
- ! The Osprey is often placed by taxonomists in its own family, Pandionidae.
- ! Their length varies from 21 to 24 1/2 inches and wingspan from 54 to 72 inches. (The female is larger than the male).
- ! Weight is about 3 or 4 pounds. (They carry fish up to 4 pounds or more).
- ! The oldest known Osprey was 32 years old.
- ! They eat, almost exclusively, fish.
- ! Female lays 2 to 4 eggs -- usually 3.
- ! Eggs are incubated for 32 to 43 days depending on the part of the world.
- ! The young make their first flight 48 to 59 days after hatching and can return to their nest, though awkwardly.
- ! The same nests can be used for decades and may weigh up to half a ton.
- ! Some young Ospreys return to their birth place when they're two years old.
- ! Ospreys don't breed until age three.
- ! Although one of the most widely distributed birds in the world, the Osprey is not common. It is listed as "uncommon" in North America and "uncommon during the summer months" in Utah.