

AN UNSUSPECTED OSPREY CONCENTRATION IN WEST-CENTRAL SASKATCHEWAN

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During the spring and summer of 1975 a concentration of 15 nesting Osprey pairs was found in an area of approximately 15 townships (540 sq. mi.) west of Loon Lake in west-central Saskatchewan. All except one of the nests were found from light aircraft. The area involved was visited weekly by varying the route to a regularly scheduled medical clinic. The Piper Super Cub could be slowed to 60 mph low over shorelines, making nest spotting fairly easy. Counting eggs and young was much more difficult, especially as the young huddle together, so that the number of young reared is known only for those nests actually climbed. A nest was deemed to be active if adult Ospreys were regularly present at or near the nest. This was not a foolproof working definition for one nest, thought to be inactive when visited in June, contained young in late July, and two other nests that had anxious Ospreys in attendance at all times were empty when climbed.

On July 1, the Super Cub was leased to a commercial operator and effective surveillance virtually ceased. The weekly trips were now made in a Beech Bonanza, too fast and not sufficiently manoeuvrable for our purpose, as a tragic accident was to prove. Normally, when we approached an Osprey nest with the Super Cub, one adult would leave the nest when we were up to a mile away, whilst the other adult usually sat tight on the nest as we passed within 150 to 200 feet. On the unfortunate day, the bird which left the nest early climbed up fairly high — and then dived at the Beech

Bonanza. The aircraft was turned in an effort to avoid contact soon after the Osprey began to dive but the bird hit the propellor spinner, causing minor damage to the machine and the immediate death of the bird. (The remaining adult nevertheless managed to raise 2 young successfully).

This episode suggests caution, since the Osprey might well have hit the propellor or crashed through the windshield and thus caused the plane to crash. It is recommended that only aircraft flown at speeds comparable to that of the Osprey should be used in such survey work, so that the bird may avoid the plane. The speed of 120 to 150 mph no doubt was the decisive factor in what this Osprey obviously interpreted as a threat, since this nest had been visited several times annually with the slower Super Cub for about 10 years, without precipitating such an attack.

The senior author had known of 3 active Osprey nests for up to 10 years. There are also old and unused nests in the area. During the winter of 1974-75, 8 nests were discovered in groups in 3 locations, but the next June only 2 of the 8 were active. Both active and inactive nests tended to be in groups. In the summer of 1975, there were 3 groupings that might almost be called colonies: one group of 4 nests were all unused; another group of 3 nests were all active; a final group of 4 active and 2 unused nests were within a circle just exceeding 1/4 mile in diameter.

Twelve of the 15 nests were within 25 yards of the lakeshore, one was about 100 yards back, one was along a



Osprey

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creek and one was in a muskeg. Five nests were in live conifers, 2 in dying conifers, 2 in dead conifers, 5 in dying or dead poplars, and one in a dying birch.

On July 26, Dr. C. Stuart Houston, Mary Houston, and Dick Ehman arrived on a banding expedition. Six of the most climbable and accessible nests were visited. One nest with young could not be reached since the top of the tree was dead; one inactive nest near an active nest tree was climbed in error and the mistake not recognized until a later aerial visit; one nest with anxious parents was empty and presumably had failed. Five young were banded in the remaining 3 nests: one bird about 70 ft. above ground in a live white spruce, another about 66 ft. in a live white spruce and three young about 18 ft. up in a dead black poplar.

On October 17, 9 nests were visited by air one morning. At one nest, there was a dark Osprey, probably an immature, which kept returning as we circled the nest.

Not all probable habitat was visited by air in 1975 and, no doubt, additional Osprey nests remain undiscovered nearby. During the surveys, 3 colonies of 80, 40, and 15 Great Blue Heron nests were located, in addition to 2 sites with only 2 heron nests each.

This concentration of Osprey nests is

without precedent in Saskatchewan. Apparently by extrapolation from early Osprey records in adjacent central Alberta, Loon Lake is within the Osprey breeding range map in Godfrey's *Birds of Canada* (1966), but, without previous records, the area was excluded from Gollop's map in the *Atlas of Saskatchewan* (1969).

A related fish-eating species, the Bald Eagle, generally shares the Osprey's range elsewhere in Saskatchewan, but in greater numbers. Aerial surveys for Bald Eagle nests in east-central Saskatchewan by D. W. A. Whitfield and J. M. Gerrard located nearly 10 Bald Eagle nests for each Osprey nest found. In contrast, we know of only one Bald Eagle nest in the region, at a lake 30 miles north of our study area, visited by the senior author in 1972.

In conclusion, the Loon Lake area would appear to be the only Saskatchewan region where breeding ospreys greatly outnumber Bald Eagles. It contains the greatest concentration of breeding ospreys yet known within Saskatchewan, in an area where the species was not previously known to occur.

We wish to thank Stuart and Mary Houston for their encouragement and advice.

