

THE OSPREY: A large fish-eating bird of prey, with a wingspan of up to 1.7m (5½ft). They are one of the world's most spectacular raptors. The osprey is famed for its dramatic fishing technique of plunging into water with wings swept back, talons thrust forwards at the last minute to snatch a fish below the surface.

HISTORY IN BRITAIN: Ospreys were once common in Scotland, and probably England - there are references to ospreys in Shakespeare's plays (1564-1616) and poems by John Skelton (c1460-1529) and Michael Drayton (1563-1631). Numbers declined in the 18th and 19th centuries due to human persecution in various forms. It is unlikely that any ospreys nested in England after the 1830s and probably for much longer. The last breeding pair was destroyed in Scotland in 1916. A few migrant birds were seen in Scotland during the 1930s and 1940s but ospreys were extinct as a breeding species in the UK until a pair started to nest in Strathspey from 1954. Breeding success was low until 1959 when intensive wardening increased the security given to the birds. The population in Scotland has grown slowly to around 160 pairs.



HABITAT: The osprey is a summer visitor to Europe, spending the winter in Africa. The UK's birds winter mostly in Senegal, The Gambia or Mauritania, returning in late March to early April and departing mid-August to mid-September. Adults migrate several weeks before the young who have to find their own way south. The core population area in the UK is in the Scottish Highlands where ospreys favour areas with Scots Pine forests, fresh water lochs and rivers. These provide nesting and feeding sites similar to those found in Scandinavia.

DIET: During the breeding season, ospreys hunt up to 20 km from their nest site. They catch live fish weighing up to 1 kg, including pike, perch, trout and eels. During incubation, the male does the fishing, taking prey to his mate on the nest. Daily food consumption is about 300g (10 oz), with between one and four fish caught, increasing when young are in the nest. Ospreys dive feet first but can only penetrate about one metre below the water surface and so only catch fish that frequent shallow water. The osprey's feet are specially adapted to catch fish: short sharp spines covering the base of the foot pad and toes aid the long sharp talons in catching prey.

BREEDING: Osprey nests tend to be a large platform of sticks in the crown of a tree and birds return to the same site each year. Nesting sites are normally within 3-5 km of water and are often reused each year, some for decades. The eggs are extremely variable, having a white to fawn background colour, which is blotched with brown or deep red. The clutch of 2-3 eggs is laid from mid-April to mid-May. Both sexes

incubate the eggs, with the female taking the greater share and incubating at night. There is only one brood and the young fledge after 53 days. Young birds mature slowly and are able to breed when between three and six years old.

POPULATION: The osprey is a cosmopolitan raptor and is found in every continent except the Antarctic, although it does not breed in South America or in most of Africa. The estimated world population is 25,000-30,000 breeding pairs, although the European population, which is mainly in Scandinavia, is only around 8,000 pairs (1994). The Scottish population is 150-160 pairs.