

An Osprey surveys the Florida Keys backcountry for its next meal. Catfish, mullet and ladyfish are its favorite foods found in the shallow waters of Florida Bay.

This spring I noticed that Osprey were missing from where I live in North Key Largo. Absent were their short mellow whistling calls, and all of the Osprey platforms in the mangroves and natural areas lie empty. Golfers were noticing the nesting poles on the three golf courses were also abandoned. Birders concurred that our local Osprey were indeed absent.

Inquiring minds want to know! My quest to find an answer led to many “round-about” theories, but no idea as to why our resident Osprey were missing. In the 1960s Osprey were listed as a threatened species, in decline due to the use of the pesticide DDT, which was banned in 1972. Osprey rebounded and were removed from threatened status in 2009. Currently, the overall population is doing well.

Osprey in the Keys tend to stay here year-round, though we do get some wintering migrants from the north. Their recent absence could just be due to

seasonal change, when Osprey northerners (like snowbirds) have started to leave this area to head to their northern nesting grounds. Another possibility is some of our locals journeyed into Central/South America and may just not have made it back yet.

Maybe something is sending them away? Could there be predation on the nest or food scarcity? Are raccoon, iguana or python, preying on their nests or competing for food? Osprey rarely eat anything other than live fish, and I wasn't aware of any issues regarding lack of fish. Catfish, mullet and ladyfish are favorite foods found in the shallow waters of Florida Bay. Based on research concerning mercury levels in waterways, which, given Monroe County's predisposition for higher concentrations, could mercury be affecting behavior or breeding success? Because we have had drought for the past two years? All possibilities, but only speculation on my part.



Bayleigh MacHaffie, Operations Director at FKWBC, toss-released the Osprey in front of a crowd of supporters at Mike Marker104.



A second release took place at Pennekamp Park.

The most inspiring news came from Erin Allison, Executive Director of Florida Keys Wild Bird Rehabilitation Center (FKWBC), who reported admissions were up at FKWBC, where four Osprey fledglings were in her care. Erin reported “one was orphaned, two fell from nest, and one due to emaciation. All young-uns.” She quipped “perhaps we weren't seeing any because they were all in her care!”

Her patients were most likely our local birds just learning how to be Osprey. At FKWBC birds are checked for injuries such as broken bones and bruises and treated for emaciation, mites and internal parasites. When ready, the birds are put into a large L-shaped flight enclosure, where they can learn how to fly, circle, perch and get their stamina up before release.

After about 6 weeks in rehabilitation, two of the fledgling Osprey were set to be released back into the wild, and I was fortunate to witness the releases.



Osprey Rehabilitation... CONTINUED



Joshua Wenkert Lane, who found the fledgling Osprey wandering around on the ground near Pennekamp Marina, opened the door for the walk-out release.



“Penne” heads off to a happier tomorrow... hopefully to raise chicks of its own.

The first release was from the dock behind a bayside Key Largo bar during “Happy Hour.” The FKWBC releases birds from this location in order to bring attention to their mission. The dock leads out toward the bay, surrounding mangrove islands and shallow fishing grounds. Bayleigh MacHaffie, Operations Director at FKWBC, toss released the Osprey. It flew away from land, and soon made a dive into the water. An Osprey has keen eyesight, and can see neutral colored fish from 300 ft. high in the air. They dive with wings half closed, and instantly grab their prey with their long talons, and moments later shake the water from its wings and emerge up into the air again, heading off to its nest where the fish will be consumed.

This released Osprey did not emerge from the water right away. A few tense moments ensued. Some onlookers called for action to rescue the bird, The FKWBC assured nervous observers that this is what “fish hawk” do. After a short while the bird was retrieved. “Mr. Osprey crash landed, got water logged, and we took him to a beach so he could dry off and he flew off beautifully on his own,” Erin explained.

The second release took place the following day on a secluded beach inside Pennekamp State Park. Present were friends of the park and park rangers, including Joshua Wenkert Lane, who found the fledgling Osprey wandering around on the ground near Pennekamp Marina. The bird did not have the flight capabilities to return to the nest, and it was too risky to leave the bird on the ground.

Sara Read, Education and Outreach Coordinator at FKWBC explained, “Fledging is a natural part of a birds life cycle, so there is a period of time where there is an awkward guy hopping around on the ground figuring out how to fly. If it is in a very populated area like John Pennekamp that is where we run into issues, when human interference can play a role, and potentially injure the bird.” The release was described as a “walk-out” where Lane opened the carrier door, and the bird named “Penne” walked through the opening, and flew away to a happier tomorrow.

Both releases were beautiful, hopeful occasions made possible by the professionals who care for injured and orphaned wild birds and the donors who support their mission.




An Osprey perched in a nest on a remote mangrove island in Florida Bay.

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