

The Piscatarian Raptor: The Osprey
by Taylor Bennett

Gulf Coast Bird Observatory is currently surveying for non-breeding shorebirds that spend the winter in the Upper Texas Coast along Matagorda Beach, Follet's Island, Bryan Beach, and Quintana Beach. Along with plovers, oystercatchers, and Red Knots we often come across the humble and majestic Osprey.



Ospreys are part of the raptor family, but are highly unique because of their diet. Unlike other raptors like Red-Tailed Hawks and American Kestrels which prey on small mammals like rabbits and mice, the Osprey mainly preys on fish. This is why it is often called the Fish Hawk. Ospreys are fairly common in the fall and winter. They are often seen where there is water present like beaches, marshes, canals, etc. Wherever there are fish, there is likely an Osprey.

Ospreys are brown and white raptors with a mostly white head and a dark eye stripe. The adults have golden yellow eyes and look somewhat pigeon-like in the face. Ospreys also have a surprisingly musical chirp or shrill of a voice instead a mighty cry like most hawk species. The most obvious way to tell if you are looking at an Osprey is that it appears to be giving a fish the ride of its life between clasping talons. I cannot help but to sing Disney's Aladdin's "A Whole New World" in my head whenever I see it.

Ospreys puts fishermen to shame with their incredible fishing skills. They have multiple adaptations that make them the perfect predator for fish. They are equipped with extremely long talons that they can maneuver so that two talons are in front and two talons are in back to grasp their prey. The bottoms of their feet are padded and barbed creating a superb grip to combat the slipperiness of fish. Unlike most raptors which glide and then stick out their feet and talons first to catch prey, the Osprey has the ability to fold its wings mid-dive and plunge in the water head, feet, and talons first with incredible accuracy.

Once the fish is captured, the Osprey is able to fly back out the water with little to no struggle. What is even more impressive is that it is able to turn the fish's body so the head is facing the front of the Ospreys own body, thus helping it become more aerodynamic as it flies by creating less wind resistance.

Ospreys are a species of low conservation concern and can be seen pretty much anywhere along the coast. Most of the Ospreys we observe are migratory and can be seen throughout the winter and spring along the Texas Coast. Like most bird species along the beach, they can easily be disturbed by people, vehicles, and dogs, so please give them their space. On behalf of Gulf Coast

Bird Observatory, thanks for reading and we wish you and your families safe and well during this holiday season.

IMG_3690: Osprey observed eating a fish on top of one of GCBO's beach nesting bird signs at Matagorda Beach, Texas. (Photo taken by Taylor Bennett on October 31, 2020)