

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife

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NEWS FEATURE

OSPREY IN DANGER

Environmental pollutants may be causing the decline of the osprey, the Interior Department's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife announced today.

The osprey, also known as a "fish hawk," is found on all continents, with the American variety ranging from northwestern Alaska to southern Chile on the Pacific coast and from Newfoundland and central Quebec to Argentina on the Atlantic coast. A colony near the mouth of the polluted Connecticut River has declined from 150 to 10 nesting pairs in the last 14 years.

Researchers at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center studied osprey nesting success in Connecticut this spring. They believe that embryos from Connecticut may have been killed by some pollutant obtained by the adult from its environment and passed on to the eggs. Each embryo died as yolk was being drawn into the body.

Renowned ornithologist Roger Tory Peterson predicts that if the present rate of decline continues, fish hawks will be gone from Connecticut by 1971-- and he suspects pesticides may be responsible.

The osprey is vulnerable because it is at the top of the food chain. Pesticides accumulate as larger fish eat smaller ones, and ospreys love to dive toward the water for the largest fish they see. The prey may contain a high concentration of poison built up over time.

The osprey's presence would be missed along our lake shores and oceans. This quick-diving bird hunts for food from a height of 30 to 100 feet. Should a fish be grabbed so that its tail is toward the wind, the osprey will almost invariably turn the fish around, seemingly understanding the principles of wind resistance.

Fish hawks are often victimized by other birds--some only one tenth its size. The red-winged blackbird and common tern are among the small, but bothersome, tormentors. Eagles are troublesome, too.

Fish hawks usually nest near water and are at home on fresh water or by the sea. Nests usually are constructed in high trees, but often on rocks and sometimes on ground.

Nests are used year after year by the same or different pairs, and grow larger each season with a wide assortment of sticks and branches and often paper and debris. They may come to weigh several hundred pounds and have been known to reach half a ton.

Into these nests the female usually lays three eggs. Feeding time involves both parents, the male searching for the food and bringing it back to the female who feeds the young.

Ospreys are diligent parents. The mother usually feeds her young one at a time, filling up a single nestling before going to another. She rapidly pulls apart bits of fish to offer the youngsters being fed while the male either takes up a nearby perch for an hour or so, or goes right out after another fish.

