

The BEAT

PEOPLE FASHION

BOOKS HEALTH LIFESTYLE RECIPES MUSIC ART



THE osprey flies with a noticeable 'bend' in its wings. This is a good way to quickly identify an osprey in the field. PHOTO BY FAYARD MOHAMMED

The Osprey

A fisherman on wings

IF you happen to be near water, be it the sea, large pond or a water-course, take a moment to look up in the sky. Do you see a large whitish bird circling high above? Those of us living or working near the Gulf of Paria should be especially familiar with the sight of one of these birds flying inland from the coast, often with a shiny cutlass fish dangling from its claws.

Perhaps you have heard its sad cry while at the beach? This is the osprey, *Pandion heliatus* or, as it is more commonly known, the fish hawk.

Fish hawks are large predatory birds which, as their names suggests, feed almost exclusively on fish and not on chickens or other domestic livestock as some people may wrongly believe.

As a result of their diet, they are very often found in proximity to bodies of water, marine or fresh, where they can catch their food. They are found on all our coasts, while favorite inland sites include the ponds at La Vega Estate as well as all



THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

WASA and Petrotrin dams.

Some birds can be found throughout the year in Trinidad and Tobago, but the majority of ospreys are visitors, arriving in October and returning to their North American breeding grounds around April.

Our birds are of the North American race *P. h. carolinensis*, but there are actually several different races of osprey found scattered

throughout the world, including in Australia, Africa, Europe and Japan, with taxonomists recognizing between four and five races.

This distribution gives the osprey the distinction of being the second most widely distributed raptor in the world (the peregrine falcon, *Falco peregrinus* being the first).

Seen from below, ospreys are mostly white with some darker markings under their wings.

Their wings have a characteristic bend which is a useful field mark for quick identification when the bird is in flight.

If perched, the dark wings and dark eye stripe can be seen.

The call of the osprey is a typical sound of coastal areas and consists of a mournful whistle.

These birds call both while perched and while in flight, and especially when there is another osprey nearby.

While the breeding of ospreys in Trinidad and Tobago has never been



WITH its wings folded, feet stretched forward and its talons ready, the osprey dives at a fish. PHOTO COURTESY THE US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

ENVIRONMENT

Birds known for nest of sticks

● **OSPREY** from Page 1B
officially confirmed, birds have occasionally been reported attempting to build nests.

In countries where ospreys do nest, they are famous for constructing large cup shaped nests made of sticks.

In the 1950s and 1960s osprey populations declined dramatically due to the use of DDT based pesticides in North America and elsewhere. Widely used in agriculture, DDT made its way into the streams and rivers and, eventually, into the fishes that the osprey fed on.

While this chemical did not kill the birds, it seriously affected the success rate of nesting attempts by reducing the thickness of their egg shells and causing their eggs to break easily.

After the use of DDT was banned, the population of ospreys and other raptors slowly increased, encouraged by man-made nesting platforms which were constructed in many parts of North America.

When searching for fish,

the osprey will fly above open bodies of water and, when one is spotted, will dive with legs outstretched to grab prey close to the water's surface.

Grasping the fish with their strong legs and talons, the osprey will then fly out of the water and head to a perch to feed.

While these perches are usually near water, ospreys may sometimes fly a considerable distance inland to a favourite perch which may be a natural perch, such as an exposed tree branch, or a man-made perch, such as a light pole or an electricity or telecommunication tower.

In local coastal areas, the cutlass fish appears to be a favourite prey item, possibly being easier to capture than other species.

In inland fishing sites, the introduced tilapia is favoured.

Whatever the type of fish, upon catching one, the osprey will orient the fish in its talons to face forward which ostensibly makes transport more efficient.

Unlike many birds, ospreys

have two toes facing forward and two facing backwards which allows them to get a firm grasp on slippery prey.

The ability to close its nostrils is another adaptation to a life of hunting fish, as osprey regularly plunge up to one metre underwater in order to catch their fish.

These visitors are iconic representatives of our marine ecosystems. Indeed, they should be cherished and protected so that generations to come will still be able to look up in the sky and enjoy the sight and sound of our majestic 'fishing king'.

Today's feature was written by Kris Sookdeo. For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit our website at www.ttfnc.org. The Club's next monthly meeting will be held today at St Mary's College, PoS. This month's lecture: "Mantises of TT" presented by Mark Greener of the UWI Zoology Museum.



OSPREYS, like this pair in the United States, build large stick nests on trees, cliffs or man-made structures. This one sits atop a utility pole.

PHOTO COURTESY WIKIPEDIA



AFTER catching a fish, the osprey will fly to its favourite perch to eat. These perches can sometimes be far inland. PHOTO BY FAYARD MOHAMMED