

Illinois' Second Confirmed Breeding Osprey

by Craig Thayer

Recently, Bergman Slough, part of the hodgepodge John J. Duffy Preserve in southwest Cook County, was nearly unknown to birders. This small body of water was notable only for the occasional observation of raptors (including Bald Eagle and Osprey) during migration.

In June 1996 the notoriety of this location changed. An Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) had been observed there in early June and on 20 June 1996. I visited the site in the

unlikely event the bird might still be present. Amazingly I observed an Osprey gathering freshly mowed grass from a field 0.3 miles southeast of the slough; it deposited this material in a dead tree at the edge of the slough. A thorough search for a definitive nest over the next few days was non-productive but on 11 July another noteworthy event occurred. On that date a pair of adult Ospreys was observed constructing a bulky stick nest at the exact location where the grass had been placed three weeks earlier. The pair remained in the vicinity until at least 11 August (and one of them was present until as late as 6 September), but there was never any sign of incubation. Two-year-old Ospreys may construct a nest, but not lay eggs (they begin breeding at 3 years of age or older), and this may be what occurred in 1996 (Ewins 1994).

In 1997, a pair of Ospreys was seen on 17 April. Utilizing the nest constructed the previous summer, the Ospreys apparently began incubating eggs by 9 May. Unfortunately by 22 June, the nest was abandoned without evidence of offspring. To add insult to injury, the nest was destroyed in a thunderstorm on 16 August. However the resourceful birds immediately constructed a new nest in a different tree before departing for fall migration. This was to serve as the 1998 home for three young Ospreys.



On 12 April 1998, Ospreys were first observed at Bergman Slough. By 26 April, incubation had apparently begun as the female persistently sat on the nest after this date. As

early as 8 June, behavior suggesting that young might be present was observed; the female reached down into the nest as if she might be feeding young (since the large stick structure was about 100 yards from the observation point and about 40 feet above the ground, direct observation wasn't possible). This coincides with the Osprey's average incubation period of about 40 days (Ewins 1984). On 21 June 1998, two young Ospreys, their heads barely protruding above the nest rim, were identified, and four days later a third one was seen. The young fledged by 5 August (consistent with the average fledging time of about 55 days after hatching). All three juveniles, easily distinguished from adults by pale feather edgings on their backs and upperwing coverts, were still present as late as 5 September and one was there until at least 3 October 1998.

The 1998 nest was downed in a thunderstorm, but not until 25 August after the young had fledged.

This is only the second confirmed occurrence of successful breeding by Ospreys in Illinois in the 20th century. The other one occurred at Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge in 1952 (Bohlen 1989).

Meadowlark



Osprey in flight (1) and on nest (2) on 7 May 1997 at the John J. Duffy Forest Preserve in Cook County. The Osprey nest failed that year, but in 1998, a pair returned and successfully raised young in 1998. Photos by Eric Walters. See Field Notes for a photo of two Osprey juveniles taken in 1998.