

The Osprey is Getting Closer *George Batchelor*

If we could travel back in time between 0.1 to 2 million years we would be able to recognise the Osprey, as it has not changed much since then, although at that time our ancestors, homo sapiens, would be trying to make up their minds about coming down out of the trees and walking upright.

With the changing climates since then it cannot have been easy for a bird that eats just fish, when we acquired guns and a collector's instinct it suddenly got worse for them. If the naturalists of the 1600 to 1900's wanted to study something, they killed it, so by the year 1800 breeding Osprey were extinct in Ireland, in 1840 the last pair bred in Somerset and by 1916 the last pair was shot in Scotland. A naturalist of the day, Mr William Dunbar wrote in a letter to John Wolley, 'I am afraid that Mr St John, yourself and your humble servant, have finally done for the Ospreys'.

Over the next forty years a few birds passed through the UK to Scandinavia and in 1955-1958 attempts were made to nest in Scotland, but failed due to egg collectors and wind damaged nests. In 1959 a nest was protected, during incubation and hatching of the eggs, by the RSPB and so started the comeback of the Osprey.

The migration route taken to Africa by the ever-increasing numbers of Osprey hatched in Scotland, means that they stop off at the Wheatfen area and other fish stocked water bodies. Also a reintroduction programme was started in Rutland in 1996, resulting in a bird released in 1997 attracting a mate and producing one chick that year, and to date a total of 15 chicks fledged from the bird we call 03(97). (His leg ring number is 03 born in 1997).

About 14 translocated birds have been seen to return to the UK, mostly to Rutland area. This year another bird born in 1997, 08(97), bred with a female hatched in 2004 from the first nest, at a location in the middle of Rutland Water creating an excellent public viewpoint of Osprey family life from start to finish. This year 27,000 people visited Lindon Centre to see the nesting family from April to September, more than twice the total for the whole of 2006.

All Ospreys fly independently south, mostly to Africa but sometimes Spain. The female departs first when her young can tear up fish for themselves, then the two young set off one at a time about a week later to stay for two years in their chosen wintering area, with a forty per cent chance of survival and return. When all his family has left the male then starts his migration.

We are very optimistic on the future of the Rutland colony and its expansion as both nests are now 'Rutland' birds with three or four other males holding territories in the area.

At incubation time I spend half of my life guarding the eggs at Rutland, travelling over there Saturday afternoon, on watch from 8.00pm till 6.00am Sat. Sun. and Mon. nights and back on Tues afternoon, so I am afraid that my volunteer time at Wheatfen takes second place, the Ospreys have priority.

With Ospreys now breeding only 200 miles away instead of 500, there is an even greater chance of an East Anglian nest. Already Rutland released birds have chosen to nest in Wales, so with this leap across the country already taken, Ospreys already stopping off at various places in Norfolk and Suffolk and numbers of migrating birds increasing, it is only a matter of time.

My dream is to see a nest, even an artificial one, being used by Ospreys at Wheatfen.