

OCEAN OSPREY

By Heather Reid



The village of Bamfield hunkers down in an inlet on the west side of Vancouver Island. At the south end of town lies the famed West Coast Trail, to the north, Barkley Sound beckons kayakers and island hoppers to the Broken Group archipelago. While this temperate rain-forest playground contains endless outdoor recreation options, stalking osprey is a particularly thrilling choice.

About ten kilometers from town a red and white sign marks the turn to Black Lake. The road climbs a steep hump, then it winds around a few logged hills. Eventually, a mucky, root-covered footpath leads down to rusty water tinged by iron in the surrounding rocks.

The trail opens onto a pebble beach. Down at water level, a fringe of red cedar and Douglas fir blot out the clearcuts. Some thoughtful people have carried a rowboat down the narrow, slippery trail for communal use. The silent vessel is perfect for viewing the osprey on the lake.

As soon as the boat pushes off from land, a female osprey alights and shrieks warnings. Back on shore to the right of the beach sits a cup nest at the end of an old cedar snag. Fastidiously built of sticks, it's large enough to seat a medium-sized teenaged boy. As the boat moves further out, the bird calms down, and settles on a perch to keep an eye on the boat.

At an average weight of 1.6 kilograms, female osprey outweigh their mates by about one third. Ornithologists believe that the extra bulk makes them better defenders of the eggs and nestlings. Both parents invest a staggering physical cost while raising their one or two chicks

per year. During the breeding season from April to September, the female protects the young while the male fishes.

The males hunt at Pachena beach near the West Coast Trail hiker registration hut. Here, the Pacific waves roll into the long rectangular bay and spill onto the sand making it an idyllic place for bird-watching. It's not unusual to see two or three osprey at one time gliding over the shallow water scanning for a meal. They come at regular intervals from sunrise to sunset.

When the osprey spots a fish far below, it turns and dives headfirst. With wings tucked in, the bird plummets to the surface where it turns again, and thrusts its skinny, naked legs into the water. The fisher reaches in with scalpel sharp talons, and plucks out a surf-perch with remarkable regularity.

Getting up and away can be a slog, especially if the hunt has been onerous. But osprey are

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perfectly adapted for their fishing way of life - they eat no other food. Long, featherless legs end in talons covered in spicules allowing them to hang on to slippery fish while flying. The fish hawk often pauses in mid-air and shakes the water from its feathers the way a wet dog whips water from its coat. Once free of the ocean, the fish is carefully oriented head first to reduce drag for the flight home.

Fish deliveries are frequent by late August. The hungry chicks look like mad scientists with bulging eyes and disorderly feathers tufting about their pointy heads. At the nest they hop and flap, strengthening their muscles for flight. Eventually a nestling gets airborne, and seems startled by the situation. Then the bird flutters back down into the protective bowl of sticks and moss. After numerous failed attempts, a fledgling hovers above the nest at last. Then it teeters down to the lake, and spends some time getting off the ground to fly back up.

Soon after, the family makes its first migration to Mexico and beyond. The vacant nest waits out the winter until the osprey return again in spring.