

Osprey Numbers Soaring With Help From Humans

By JULIET KASZAS-HOCH

A pair of terns pestered the osprey trying to return, with prey, to his partner and their eggs in the nest atop a wooden platform on a sedge island in Barnegat Bay, one of a number of stands installed by the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey to help protect the state's population of birds also known as fish hawks.

In the decades since a population decimation caused by the use of DDT and loss of habitat, the ospreys' numbers have steadily increased as a direct result of conservation efforts like that of Conserve Wildlife's NJ Osprey Project, which monitors, manages and supports the species.

On Monday, John Faus kept his boat at a distance from the sedge island's edge so as not to agitate the brown and gray raptors, but the osprey parents – a monogamous couple – were preoccupied with their other uninvited guests. After a few laps and slick escape maneuvers, the male osprey evaded the terns and landed momentarily on the nest before taking flight once again, while his significant other stayed behind with the nest's valuable contents.

Earlier this year, Faus donated money for this particular platform, made from 100 percent salvaged wood, and in April he helped Conserve Wildlife habitat program manager Ben Wurst erect the stand inside Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge territory in the bay, in proximity to Faus' summer home in Harvey Cedars.

Faus, who brought his Cedars neighbor Bill Clarke along for the short boat ride to the waters near the nesting site, said he often spotted ospreys while spending summers on the Island, prompting him to recently search online until he discovered Conserve Wildlife's osprey project.

In support of the program, Wurst travels the state throughout the spring to install nesting platforms, primarily funded by private donations to the nonprofit group, in addition to some support from other organizations and the federal government. As Wurst explained, April 1 is his standard cut-off date for putting up new stands, but after weather delayed the installation of the structure off Cedars until later in that month, he was pleasantly surprised to learn the platform was immediately claimed by an osprey pair.

The structure includes a predator guard – a sleeve placed around the bottom of the pole – to keep island-hopping foxes and raccoons from climbing to the top.

"These nesting platforms are really their best chance," Wurst pointed out. In the past, local marshes comprised a greater abundance of trees and less predation, but as humans drove predators out into the marsh, ospreys, which will nest on the ground if they must, became more vulnerable.

Prior to the introduction of DDT in the 1950s, the state was comparatively flush with ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*). More than 500 pairs were estimated to reside in New Jersey before the use of the synthetic pesticide, but by the early 1970s, around the time the United States banned DDT, the number of pairs had dropped to 50.

"The effects of DDT in the food chain caused reproduction to fail, and habitat was lost with a burgeoning shore population that eliminated many trees and increased ground predator populations," the osprey project web site, conservewildlifenj.org/protecting/projects/



Photographs by Jack Reynolds



FLYING HIGH: (From left) John Faus and Bill Clarke took to Faus' boat on Monday to observe an osprey pair at a nesting platform on a sedge island in Barnegat Bay.

osprey/, states. New Jersey listed the osprey as endangered in 1974, and recovery began not only with the ban on DDT, but because "biologists coordinated efforts to supply man-made nest platforms for the birds. These new artificial nest platforms replaced the snags and trees that were lost as the barrier islands became more developed."

By 1986, the state's osprey population surpassed 100 pairs, and the species' status was changed to threatened. Since then, the Department of Environmental Protection Division of Fish and Wildlife's Endangered and Nongame Species Program staff has monitored and managed the population, helping the numbers reach a new post-DDT record of just more than 400 active nests in 2006.

Growing up in Manahawkin, Wurst noted, "I didn't really know what ospreys were." Years later, for his job with Fish and Wildlife, he was assigned to the osprey program. When he subsequently moved on the Conserve Wildlife Foundation, he realized that a nonprofit organization can more easily receive donations and raise funds as a means to more extensive programs and education for the public.

"I saw an open door," he explained. "We can be doing more."

He was particularly concerned that "we do everything we can here" because ospreys often winter in northern South America, where DDT is still in use, and measures to protect the birds from harm are lacking.

Wurst has constructed more than 100 nesting platforms since he began work with Conserve Wildlife in 2004. He also bands young birds and monitors the state's total population each year, either by boat or by air. In 2009, the population of the raptor continued to show an increase, with a reported 485 nesting pairs, and last year, 600 young osprey hatched. The organization is close to its goal of seeing the population recover to 500 nesting pairs.

Currently, Wurst has a number of additional osprey conservation tools in the works. He is planning a series of presentations, hopes to upload videos of platform installs to YouTube, and wants to develop a working group to coordinate preservation efforts throughout the state. He would also like to eventually broadcast live from a camera on a platform nest.

For now, the osprey pair at the Barnegat Bay platform off Cedars – named Pauw and Tauw, said Faus – can be seen only by boat or helicopter. The couple was active on Monday in their irritation at the terns, and in protecting their nest, which should soon be the cradle to hatchlings.

To learn more about the NJ Osprey Project, visit conservewildlifenj.org/protecting/projects/osprey/ or facebook.com/njospreyproject. Check out additional Conserve Wildlife projects at conservewildlifenj.org/.

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Kay West Retiring As Barnegat Clerk

Barnegat Township Clerk Kathleen "Kay" West will be retiring on June 24 after 20 years of service to the municipality.

She joined the workforce in 1991 with a job in the township clerk's office. A year later, she was named deputy clerk when Veronica Jasina was named township clerk. West succeeded Jasina when she retired in 2008.

The current deputy clerk, Sharon Auer, was named acting clerk by the township committee at its meeting Monday night.

"I've got a big list of things to do when I'm done here," said West. "I hope to do some traveling, work on my garden and see my nine grandchildren."

Mayor Jeff Melchiondo said he hopes to have a reception for her during a committee meeting in July.

"It's hard for me to say how much she has meant to us," said Melchiondo. "I want to send her off in grand fashion."

"When I first interviewed for the administrator's position, Kay was the first person I met," said Township Administrator David Breeden. "And then when I got the job, she was there to help me get familiar with Barnegat."

Committeeman Martin Lisella added, "She was there to help me when I got on board. I know we'll all miss her." —E.E.

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