



Young osprey fly in place throughout entire day. Photo J. Morton Galetto



Adult illustrates stalling before landing. Photo J. Morton Galetto

Osprey Flights of Fancy

At seven of eight weeks old, young osprey are now taking their first attempts at flying.

Back in March I wrote about the construction and placement of an osprey nesting platform on Money Island. The article addressed the plight of the osprey due to insecticide exposure, and its recovery due to people's efforts to bring it

back from the brink of extinction. It seems appropriate to follow up on what happened next. In June and July we banded osprey. The Money Island nest attracted a pair within a week of our placing it on the marsh plain and on June 30 we banded the chicks.

By the end of July and into August, eight-week-old ospreys along the river and bay will be fledging – flying off the nest. The platform will continue to serve as their home base until migration. The young birds' fishing skills are not up to par with their parents', and often they may still get a handout at this point.

During the 7th and 8th weeks, adult birds model their aerial skills and make exaggerated stalls before landing on the nest, giving lessons in anticipation of their young's first flights. The first year our nest was occupied, the neophyte parents must not have given this lesson the proper reinforcement. A large dead snag in our backyard was festooned with the three juveniles hanging upside down like bats. Apparently, if they don't decrease their speed with a proper stall they swing around on the branch and end up inverted. Unfortunately birds are not designed to take off from an upside-down position; they need to let go and achieve equilibrium to avoid crashing on lower limbs or to the ground. It takes a good deal of courage to escape this predicament! Some get exhausted before gaining the nerve, and then flying is even more difficult.

Sadly, over 50% of raptors don't make it to their first birthday because acquiring life skills is not an easy task. Flying and hunting are complex maneuvers. Becoming airborne begins at around 7 weeks of age when the chicks are the size of their mature parents. They begin facing the wind in the nest. Most coastal birds will rest facing the breeze because it enables an easier take off. For a week the birds will simply lift off the nest a few inches and set back down; think of it as flying in place. Then they will take advantage of the 'Y' shaped supports that we put on the platform support and float to one. Some brave ospreys will leap off the platform's side. One day I observed a young osprey fly in place all day long, never leaving the nest like its siblings. It waited until the next day for its first solo flight.

In July and August we get the greatest number of calls about osprey having close encounters of the weird kind. While learning to fly and fish ospreys get into all manner of dilemmas. The requests we receive have often ended up with me asking many questions that could seem a bit peculiar. For example, a number of years ago I got a call from a woman in Mauricetown who said she had an osprey chick in her kitchen. "Why is it in your kitchen?" I inquired. She replied, "It fell out of the nest." "But there aren't any nests in people's backyards in Mauricetown," I objected. This was not making sense.

So I drove down to Mauricetown, knocked on the door, and a friendly woman answered, invited me in, and showed me the orphan. I told her it wasn't an osprey. She asked if I was sure. "Without a doubt," I declared. "Well, what is it then?" "I haven't a clue," I answered, although today I realize that it was a young dove or pigeon. She wanted to know if I was going to take it with me. When I told her no, she asked what she was to do. I advised her to put it back where she found it, and the parent would probably care for it if it was healthy. In fact the parent likely was trying to do so when the kindly lady interfered through her well-intentioned yet unhelpful abducting of the hapless juvenile.

A week later yet another woman called from Mauricetown. It was bad timing for her because I was still thinking about the dove kidnapper. She relayed that she had an osprey that was injured. I said, "What does it look like?" She said, "An osprey." I asked her to be more specific, and she said with a tone of controlled insult, "I know what an osprey looks like." I said, "Humor me." After a bit I decided it was clearly an osprey. When I asked where was it she told me it was under an electric pole - bad news because electrocution is one of the most common causes of osprey mortality. I arrived at the scene and the osprey was clearly having difficulty breathing and some of its feathers were singed. I apologized for my questions and told her about the dove, which made her a bit more understanding of my continual inquiries.

I'm sorry to say that the bird did not survive this time.

On another occasion one of my river neighbors called and said an osprey was upside down on her tv aerial. Prior to cable and dishes this is how we old folk got our three television channels, if we were lucky. I asked, "What does it look like?" With total conviction that I could not ignore she said, "Jane, it's an osprey!" Then there was a very long silence, broken by, "Don't worry, my husband isn't home." Actually, my mind was racing about how I would get a young osprey down from such a height. But I was indeed happy that her spouse would be absent, preferring to avoid his aggressive rhetoric whenever I could. And on second thought, I was possibly more afraid of dealing with him than with heights.

When I arrived I realized the bird's quandary was grave. Its talon was hooked through the metal struts in such a way that it could not simply let go. I felt the electric company could save the day and I called the maintenance crew chief, who sent a lift bucket immediately. Unfortunately it was still out of reach, but as luck would have it a fire ladder and crew saved the day. I had to instruct the fireman on how to hold the bird so that the talons would not hurt him, and he successfully freed the fish hawk.

I told the rescuers that the bird was likely too exhausted to take off, but if I tossed it up, it might be able to fly. Not my best

moment. Embarrassed, I scooped it off the ground and had it transported to Tri-State Avian Rescue for a night of rest. It was simply fatigued and was successfully released the next day. That fireman was dubbed “Bird Man” for a number of months at the firehall; not a bad handle if I do say so myself.

Soon I will start getting those calls again and some folks will ask, “Are you the Osprey Lady?” And I will have that brief moment where I debate my reply.