

ON COURSE WITH NATURE

Helping the Osprey on the Road to Recovery

by NANCY P. SADLON

IF YOU GOLF ON ONE of the many courses located near large bodies of water, you may have an opportunity to catch a glimpse of a large bird — gleaming white below, dark brown above, and showing a distinct crook in its wings. You may also see the bird's massive nest — a huge pile of sticks built within the crotch of a tree or on a man-made platform. This majestic bird is the osprey.

Osprey populations have declined drastically in the past. Osprey, like the bald eagle and brown pelican, were impacted by the hydrocarbon chemical DDT used widely on agricultural fields. Discovered in the 1960s as a problem causing reproductive difficulties for a number of birds, the compound was banned in 1972 in the United States. However, the chemical is still widely used worldwide. This presents a problem for some osprey that migrate out of the country and continue to ingest fish exposed to DDT. The osprey encounters a number of other problems in its struggle for recovery both in the U.S. and in other countries. These include:

- Loss of desirable waterfront nest sites due to development.
- Pollution, causing mortality or inability to reproduce.
- Reduction of available food supply because of over-fishing.
- Increased competition for limited food supply by other bird species, including the black-backed gulls, herring gulls, and cormorants.
- Predation by gulls, great horned owls, raccoons, and opossums.

When golf courses are located in close proximity to water, they can help by providing nest platforms for the osprey. Providing suitable nest sites for the osprey has been very successful in some areas. Massachusetts and Rhode Island have witnessed population increases that have justified removal of the osprey from official protection lists. In other states, osprey populations are still low and remain listed as protected species. New Jersey lists the osprey as threatened. Florida and



Matt Jankowski holds a young osprey to be tagged by osprey expert Gilbert Fernandez. This osprey has already developed good size and fierce talons necessary for catching fish and survival.

Pennsylvania consider the osprey a species of special concern. Experts are encouraged by the ospreys' population growth, but feel the species is still in need of continued assistance for complete recovery.

For superintendent Matt Jankowski of the Acoaxet Country Club, Westport, Massachusetts, this is the time of year for osprey tagging. With the assistance of local osprey

expert Gilbert Fernandez of the Lloyd Center for Environmental Studies, the Acoaxet Club is doing its part to aid the osprey species by providing a nest platform on the perimeter of the golf course that borders on tidal Cockest Pond. Annual tagging of the young helps monitor the birds' recovery. One of Mr. Fernandez's fledged ospreys from Westport was sighted in Iquazu Falls, Paraguay — the

world record for migration distance. Two other Massachusetts courses, Hyannisport Country Club and New Seabury Golf Course, also have been successful with osprey nest platforms. Assistance in platform design and location for these two golf courses was provided by Mr. Fernandez and Bill Davis of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife.

The osprey range is not exclusive to Massachusetts. This species can be found in various areas of the country — along waterways and ocean coastlines, wherever tall tree snags or poles can be found for nesting and fish can be found for eating. There are five large regional osprey populations: Atlantic Coast, Florida, Gulf Coast, Pacific Northwest, and Great Lakes region.

Is Your Golf Course Suited for an Osprey Platform?

Not all sites are suited for the osprey. Essential elements for a successful osprey program include:

- Large bodies of water near the course.
- Good fishing grounds such as bays, wetlands, lakes, ponds, and rivers that provide a good supply of uncontaminated fish.
- Open areas for the osprey platform location. Platforms located too close to tall trees will not be used due to fear of predation by great horned owls.
- Isolated areas for the nest platform or a means of restricting human interaction. Golfers passing by are generally not a concern, especially when the nest is mounted at a 30- to 40-foot height.
- Osprey populations need to be existing in the area. Osprey do not readily colonize new areas, and therefore it is not recommended that platforms be put up in hopes of getting one to nest.
- Nest platforms with predator guards.

Nest Platforms

There are numerous osprey programs throughout the nation administered by the state fish and game divisions. These programs offer information about the bird and

provide construction guidelines for osprey platforms. Specific dimensions and mounting height will vary and are not considered critical. For example, a nest platform in an open marsh that is remote from human activities can be mounted at 15-foot height and be successful. The nest platform on a golf course where golfers may pass by regularly needs to be mounted much higher, approximately 30 to 40 feet high to provide privacy. The most important aspect of any osprey program is to meet the bird's needs by providing a platform in an appropriate location.

For help and more information on osprey, contact your state fish and wildlife division. Inquire about the status of the osprey populations in your area and whether your golf course site is suitable for an osprey nest platform. The Audubon Society of New York State, administrators of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System, also provides information on the osprey and can help you identify osprey experts in your region.

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

The Religion of Golf

by LARRY GILHULY

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IS IT MY IMAGINATION, or is there a movement underway out there among a small but widely distributed and vocal group of golfers who actually believe the GAME of golf is more than just a game? These fanatics insist that under all circumstances the putting surfaces should be maintained at or above 10 feet on the Stimpmeter; the fairways should be totally green, yet firm and with no wet areas; the bunkers should be in perfect condition with no bad lies; and tees must be perfectly flat and mowed to a height that only a military barber could appreciate! At the same time, they also want roughs at 2 inches or higher, and the course must be set up for championship conditions at all times. They completely forget that most golf courses are played by golfers with handicaps of 16 and above.

Guess who's caught in the middle of this? You've got it — the golf course superintendent. Regardless of the type of irrigation

system, drainage, trees, topography, weather patterns, grass species, amount of play, size of greens, soil type, and countless other variables the superintendent must deal with, they are expected by this vocal minority to perform miracles in growing turf.

I would remind this minority of vocal players of one thing: Golf is a game that is supposed to be fun! Sure it can be exasperating and difficult. However, it is not a matter of life and death. If your ball lands in a wet spot, play it. If it's buried in a bunker, hit the ball and continue on your way. If the ball comes up a bit short on your first putt, remember to adjust your putting stroke for the rest of the round.

For those who are starting to recognize themselves, allow your superintendent to do the following:

- Maintain greens at a moderate speed that puts healthy turf first and speed second. Most

golfers prefer smoothness over speed, and an 8- to 9-foot Stimpmeter reading is entirely acceptable when the greens are smooth.

- Maintain firm conditions, but don't force the superintendent into losing control of large areas of turf by insisting that irrigation practices be changed to suit your game. Remember, one of the superintendent's main functions is to keep players from messing up their own golf course!

- Realize that the golf course superintendent has a staff and a family that rely on his decision-making skills. It should be a game to you, but it is a livelihood for the superintendent. Remember this the next time you explode after missing a 4-footer and immediately blame everyone but yourself!

I hope everyone recalls these thoughts the next time they tee it up. It truly does put the GAME of golf in its proper perspective. Say Hallelujah!