

# FIELD NOTE

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## Desperate Fishwives

*Paul M. Roberts*

It was April 10, 2005, and she was at home, apparently just taking it easy. Her mate was not far away, relaxing by himself on a log in the marsh. The Old Pines Ospreys on Plum Island were back. (At least, they looked to be the same Ospreys.) They'd been back for about ten days. The nest was fairly spartan, with no sign of eggs laid, much less incubation. It was pretty quiet in the early afternoon. I set up to watch this scene of domestic tranquility.

We all were just sitting for quite a while in our respective spots. After about a half hour, he flew up to the platform and moved some of the furniture around, arranging a few sticks just so with minimal effort. He was noticeably smaller than she, and she had a large, dusky necklace. He then flew back to the log. They then did what hawks do so well. They just sat there, doing nothing. It looked pretty hum drum.

A half hour later, she started calling loudly, *pip...pip...pip...* and hunched down in the nest, as a large, apparently migrating Osprey made right for the platform. The volume of her cries grew quickly, and the huge, probably female Osprey kept on coming. Her mate rose from the log and flew to the platform, joining her. The intruding female passed very close, but kept on flying north.

Back to bored city. But then I saw another Osprey approach, going north. The female crouched in the nest and started calling again. Her mate started calling too, as he perched on the edge of the platform between her and the oncoming Osprey. He then took off towards the visitor, escorted it into neutral airspace, and followed it out of sight. When the male returned, he came around behind me, approaching from the south and alighted on the platform. I thought I was witnessing an impromptu assignation, but it quickly became evident this was the male of the nest.

Once again it turned quiet for about half an hour. Suddenly, a shadow passed close over my head. I looked up and discovered a Cooper's Hawk beating its wings laboriously quite close to me, carrying a small, black bird in its talons. I shifted my scope from the platform to the accipiter, watching it carry its prey southward. While I was watching the Cooper's, who was making very slow progress, I heard the Osprey call again. The calls became louder and more incessant. Almost reluctantly, I turned to see what was going on.

Two Ospreys were in a dogfight. The action was intense. Two eagle-sized birds acting like Sharpies. The larger Osprey was being dive-bombed by a smaller, faster Osprey, on its butt like a heat-seeking missile. The pursued turned left, then right, then left, taking evasive measures. Each new move seemed to incense the presumed male, who was calling, echoing the frantic calls of the pursued. Clearly, the male was defending the nest against another outsider. Sure enough, his mate was standing on

the edge of the platform watching the action. I was reminded of an experience last year, when there were good-sized chicks in the nest. A large deer approached the platform, browsing en route. The male Osprey took off from his secondary perch and started dive-bombing the deer, making contact with his talons and driving the deer quickly past the nest out into the marsh in the direction of Grape Island.

But when I looked more carefully, the nesting male wasn't chasing the intruder. He was sitting on the log in the marsh, taking all the action in as well. These were two different Ospreys! The dogfight continued. The pursued turned north, with her tormentor still in hot pursuit, hitting on her literally. They both disappeared out of sight. The only scenario that seemed to make sense was that the intrusive female had attempted to attract the nesting male, but he had not responded, and she was discovered by her (the intruder's) mate (there are at least three active Osprey nests within several miles). Shades of Wisteria Lane.

The voyeurs returned to their hum-drum existence. For about fifteen minutes. They sat "together" on the platform, like an old married couple taking each other for granted. Looking bored. In the pool beneath them, I spied a pair of Black Ducks, which had been dabbling in the pond beneath the nest for some time, now copulating. Suddenly, the female Osprey stood up and stretched slowly, spreading each wing and leg in turn. She then lifted her tail and ejected a stream of whitewash off the platform and started waddling towards her mate. I must be dense, but her mate clearly wasn't because he got the signals I had totally missed. He lifted vertically off the platform like a helicopter, dropped his legs, and landed on her back. She lifted her tail, he turned his 180 degrees, and cloacal contact was made for no more than five seconds. It must have been special, or strenuous, because he then quickly flew off, and for the first time in over two hours returned quickly with a fairly large fish. He dropped it at her feet, which was good because the fish was still quite alive and flopping around the nest. She put her foot down on the fish, and began to eat. This was what I had been hoping to see! But not for long.

They returned to boredom. Then, suddenly, they were both alert. A bird, a large bird, possibly a large accipiter, was hurtling towards them, tight and fast. It passed by quickly, however, without incident— an adult male Northern Harrier.

Within five minutes, another Osprey was coursing up the marsh. Both occupants of the nest platform grew alert, the female calling and crouching down in the nest. The male stood up on the edge of the nest, seemingly impervious. The larger, approaching Osprey continued head-on towards the platform. She was calling. There was no sign of indecision on the nesting platform. No sign of flight. The intruder just kept on flying north.

About the fourth or fifth party of visitors arrived on the viewing platform. They saw an Osprey sitting on its platform, and then one of them discovered a second Osprey sitting on the ground. Just sitting, doing nothing. Boring. I invited them to look at the Ospreys through my scope, which they did. They commented on how beautiful the birds looked and left. They were pretty, but boring.

It was time for me to go. I've watched Peregrines defend their eyries with chicks. I've seen nesting Red-shoulders rise out of the forest to challenge migrating Peregrines soaring overhead. I've seen territorial Broad-winged Hawks yanked out of the woods like puppets on a string whenever migrating Broadwings passed by too low. I've seen colonies of Ospreys early in the breeding season. But until April 10, I had not appreciated the challenges faced by a single pair of Ospreys, nesting out in the open on a hawk flyway. When I thought they were sitting there bored, they were actually exhausted from all the stress. It also appeared that for today, at least, actually for only several hours, almost half a dozen females had challenged the female on the nest, looking to perhaps take her nest site, or her male, possibly for only a few minutes.

Contrary to my initial impression, these two Ospreys made "Desperate Housewives" look pretty mundane. 🐦

### **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Additional Hunting and Fishing Programs on National Wildlife Refuges**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to add hunting and fishing programs on six national wildlife refuges in Alabama, California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Minnesota and New Hampshire. The Service is also proposing to expand hunting and fishing opportunities at seven additional wildlife refuges.

"Fulfilling the intent of the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act, the Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to expand compatible wildlife dependent recreational opportunities, such as hunting and fishing, on our national wildlife refuges. We welcome hunters, anglers, bird watchers, photographers, and others who seek to enjoy the extraordinary resources on this nation's wildlife refuges," said Acting Fish and Wildlife Service Director Matt Hogan.

The Service is proposing to add the following wildlife refuges to the agency's list of units open for hunting or fishing: ...; Stewart B. McKinney NWR in Connecticut; Assabet River NWR in Massachusetts; ... and Silvio O. Conte NWR in New Hampshire.

In addition, the Service is proposing to expand recreational hunting and fishing opportunities on seven wildlife refuges: ... Moosehorn NWR in Maine; Great Meadows NWR and Oxbow NWR in Massachusetts; ....

The full text of the proposed Refuge-Specific Regulations for Hunting and Fishing can be found on the Internet at <http://refuges.fws.gov> within the "Policies and Budget" link. News releases are also available on the World Wide Web at <http://news.fws.gov>.