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Osprey Captures Gray Squirrel

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At approximately 0800 H on 6 February 1982, I saw an Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) capture an Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) at Blue Springs State Recreation Area, near Orange City, Florida. Several squirrels were foraging on the ground, in and around a picnic site in a partly cleared area of live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) and unidentified palms adjoining the St. Johns River. Using 7x binoculars, I watched the Osprey glide in a shallow dive for about 100 m along a curving flight-path. It flew from the river over the clearing, snatched the squirrel from the ground without pausing, then flew back over the river, where it was lost to view behind trees.

The capture occurred about 100 m away; unfortunately, my view of the moment of capture was obscured by shrubbery, so I was unable to observe the reactions of the victim, or other squirrels, to the attack. The squirrel was grasped firmly in the Osprey's talons, and was immobile; I did not record whether it was carried in one or both feet.

Wiley and Lohrer (1973) reviewed records of non-fish prey taken by Ospreys. These included mammals as large as ground squirrels and rabbits, as well as a variety of birds, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates. More recent instances of atypical prey have been reported by Castrale and McCall (1983), Kern (1976), Layher (1984) and Proctor (1977). This is apparently the first record of an Osprey taking a tree squirrel (albeit from the ground), and is one of rather few observations of the actual attack. It is unfortunate that the ultimate use of the squirrel could not be observed.

Wiley and Lohrer (1973) recorded at least 9 non-fish prey, mainly cotton rats (*Sigmodon hispidus*), taken by a pair of Ospreys near Tampa, Florida, in 1972. They suggested that some inland-nesting Ospreys might exploit an abundant alternative food source, since they are presented with more opportunities for non-fish prey while travelling between the nest and scattered bodies of water than are coastal-nesting Ospreys.

The incident described here took place alongside a large, clear river in mild, calm weather under a light overcast sky. The long, stealthy approach and adept capture by the Osprey suggests that this incident may have

been a regular feature of its hunting routine. These circumstances support the suggestion that some Ospreys take prey other than fish in an opportunistic manner, without the pressure of poor fishing conditions, inexperience, or other constraints on more typical hunting behavior.

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