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THE AMERICAN OSPREY OR FISH HAWK

by

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From the minute one enters the portals of Yellowstone Park new experiences and thrills begin for the wildlife enthusiast. Rolling liesurely along from Mammoth Hot Springs to Gardiner, the Finley-Smith camera party stopped the big Buick so suddenly that it unseated the occupants. The highway here runs level and a-flush with the bank of roaring Gardiner River. Almost above and piercing several hundred feet into the sky was a pointed pinnacle on top of which was the big stick nest of an osprey. As luck would have it, she sat a-perch of her sky-scraper home. In the afternoon light she showed a mixture of glossy black-brown with lighter breast, sitting like a sentinel overlooking the whole narrow valley. It surely was the same as she of the high pine perch over bottomless Paulina Lake.

Quietly but quickly camera's, tripods, cases of lenses, light meters and other apparatus came out of the car and everybody was busy taking long-distance shots at the lofty aery. The setting for the picture was made by an artist and the hands of those to whom it was new were shaky on the trigger. With the camera's eye cocked straight up and our own necks craned till they kinked, we made out three little heads poked up beside the mother, nudging for supper, for it was near five o'clock. She uttered a soft note. She was watching for some one. There was a swish of wings as the male osprey circled above and lighted like a feather beside his mate on the nest. As he descended we saw an unusual thing. A fair sized fish adjusted head foremost and lengthwise under his white breast was being carried in his talons like an airplane transporting a load. He placed the fish in the nest, but the mother didn't take any notice of it. She was uneasy at the battery aimed at her from below. The two birds sat for some time as if they had made up their minds not to carry on any of their family affairs until the intruders took themselves off. But the male got tired of waiting and finally picked up his fish offering and sailing along the cliffs de-

posited it on a high ledge level with the big nest. Then he soared into the sky and was not seen for some time.

One could only interpret this episode in his own way, and it might be far from the truth, this trying to read a bird's mind. His wife might have told him he should have known better than to bring supper home in the face of spies and that she could not possibly attend to it then. At any rate, he heeded what she said to him and thinking of his hungry children in the nest, put his fish on a shelf where the mother could utilize it when she got ready.

It is safe to say that the osprey lives up to his name of fish hawk and lives on fish. He may bring in a water snake or a frog, but it is unusual. The family living above Gardiner River combed rather low over the rushing water and the white cascades, but one suspects that their catch was rather diminutive for these streams close to the highways are so fished out that a six-inch trout is the rule and not worth the work. Several times we saw the old bird - presumably the male - bring in a larger fish, but he came swinging high in the sky from some distance, probably a larger river or lake. The ospreys nesting on the high pinnacles that jut up like toothpicks from the Yellowstone Canyon walls must have to drop down several hundred feet to their fishing, as the canyon here is stated to be over seven hundred and fifty feet deep.

The osprey's fishing is daring and dramatic. Once we saw an old osprey perched on a tall pine stub perhaps a hundred feet above Paulina Lake. She was accustomed to sit for long intervals as immovable as a sphynx, barely turning her head, but one felt that her far-seeing eye had been probing the green depths below. All at once she plummeted down like a black arrow, went clear underneath and was instantly up again, to swing high and eat her dinner. It was all so rapid that one could hardly tell how it happened. The old pine must have been a family fishing perch for we seldom passed it in a boat without finding one of them on watch. We didn't feel like grumbling because they took a few fish. Since man is a born fisherman also, why kick because the osprey takes some for his real needs- even trout?

Days had been hot with fitful thunder showers and moody changeable skies

that interfered with photographic work. One morning we started for the lower part of the Park seeking new game. Crossing ~~and~~ ^{the} narrow and twisted bridge over the river, we slowed down as we neared the osprey's aery. As usual all looked up. In the pale light the pinnacle looked ^{like} a big splinter that had broken off from the mountain side with crevices cutting down its sides. It wasn't asleep, for sticking as thick as fleas in these cracks the cliff swallows swarmed. Many were winging about the steeple, up and down, in and out as if in morning play. The osprey apparently is no ogre to the smaller birds for magpies and kingbirds have been known to take advantage of the osprey's big stick house and build nests in the strongly woven under structure.

It was six o'clock. The air was clear and the light would soon be fine. That settled it. The camera men decided to climb up to the big nest for close-ups. With cameras on their backs, they picked their way up the precipitous slope, hot and hard, and at last perched behind some rocks and bushes opposite the pinnacle where they could look into the home. For the moment they were in the shade, and they were in for a long wait. The mother osprey was on her nest and immediately began her piercing calls of distress at their nearness. She flew off and for a long time circled about in the sky, never ceasing to cry. Glancing across the canyon, the white head and dark form of the male could be seen as he perched on the tip of a pine. The mother flew over to him as if begging him to do something about those two men who were molesting her peace of mind. He said nothing as far as we could hear, but still sat undisturbed. This went on for an hour after which the mother got up courage enough to fly back and light on her nest edge. But she was afraid and staid only a moment, and again continued her circling and crying. Later she returned and staid a little longer, and after several returns sat long enough for the camera men to train their picture guns on her. Long before this, the sun had broken over the rim above them and they sat sweltering in the heat against the rocky cliff.

At last the male osprey left his perch and floated liesurely above the nest as if trying to see if any harm had been done to his home and family. Having satisfied himself that it wasn't half as bad as his mate had reported, he spiraled

into the blue for a spin. Two minutes later we looked back and he was again on his watch tower. It seemed uncanny how long he could sit there motionless. He should have been off fishing, but seemed to think it would be useless at this time. The mother had subsided in her crying and had settled down so close on the nest that no wisp of a feather showed. The children must have been hungry, but they were lying close according to command. The home had the air of an old deserted heap of sticks.

It was monotonous waiting for some move from the nest or the sky. Beside me as I sat in the shade of the car, Gardiner River rushed along with the drowsy hum of a mill wheel. White water poured over mossy boulders into deep green pools, only to flow on over more green pools, the destiny of every little mountain river. A water ouzel teetered pensively on a rock at the edge, or took a short flight down stream. A dragonfly lighted near my foot and I saw the glistening iridescence of his body and lacy wings. As I sat musing, I went back to our first trip to the Park, when we jogged along in a horse-driven, high-wheeled two-seater over narrow roads. It was 1915 and we passed under this same pinnacle with an osprey's nest on its top. The nest has been occupied every year since and growing larger with each family. We had seen it many times in the twenty-five years, but who knew how much older than that it really was?

I became aware of shadows moving above me. The two old ospreys were floating together in the blue sky. There was no sound. Their suspicion of us had somewhat abated, but still they had not fed the young. Two pairs of wide wings floated effortlessly, now hanging almost suspended, excellerating with no apparent wing movement, banking, soaring up again with power and ease- expert pilots of the air currents and the clouds.

The osprey is a universally known resident of most of this country. As a color scheme, his head, neck and entire lower parts are pure white; back, shoulders, wings and tail deep burnt umber with a faint purplish sheen, tail barred with seven even dusky bands, an irregular dusky band proceeding backward from the eye; feet grayish-blue, claws black, eye yellow or red.

In a short distance along Yellowstone Canyon, at least four osprey nests can be seen from the rim perched out in space on the tops of towering pinnacles.

In three of them we saw three young each, and beside the fourth a disconsolate bird sat on the tip of a pine tree, for in her nest were only bleached rocks. There was no one to explain the enigma of how the rocks could get into the nest. A normal nest is flat on top, three or four feet across, and from three to seven feet in depth according to age. In the depression in the center softened by chips and other debris, lie from two to four eggs splotted in brilliant browns, chocolates and lavenders. There is but one brood a season.

The exciting climax in almost any family is when the children leave home, especially if the event is precipitated by an unexpected occurrence. The camera fiends were the unexpected occurrence in the Gardiner River osprey home, but at that we did not see any of them depart the big nest. This almost final episode- for they gather again to dine at the old home platform- was witnessed by Vernon Bailey and cannot better be described than in his "Wild Animals of Glacier National Park."

"Presently one of the old birds came to the nest, holding its long wings over the platform in alighting. As if to draw the young, it staid but a moment, and when it had gone the urge to follow came irresistibly to the more courageous of the two brothers. Standing on the edge of the nest, he raised his wings above it. As he held them lifted there came a beautiful moment when the wind seemed to fill his sails. All the possibilities and joy of flight were in that tremulous moment. Then, with the courage and strength of a creature born to fly, his feet loosened and up he rose above the nest! Thrilled by the poetry of the first flight, I sat spellbound watching him. Would he drop back? No, he had tasted freedom and power. But the wind blew hard in his face and he was borne back behind the nest tree. Rallying, perhaps in a lull, he flew ahead again. But what should he do out in this limitless space? For a few moments he drifted about aimlessly, and then, quite naturally, having always lived in a tree-top, flew down over a spruce spire and with much flapping of wings and evident perturbation, finally let his feet down and got his balance."