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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 down 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 was the same as she of the high pine perch over bottomless Paulina Lake.

Quietly but quickly cameras, tripods, cases of lenses and other apparatus came out of the car and everybody was busy taking long-distance shots at the lofty aery. 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 the pinnacle and lighted like a feather beside his mate on the nest. As he descended we caught sight of a fair sized fish lengthwise ^{and tight} under his white breast, being carried in his talons like an airplane carrying 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 deposited 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 he should know 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 frog or a water snake, but it is unusual. The family living above Gardiner River combed rather low over the rushing water and the white cascades, but one suspects 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 ~~xx~~ 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 watched an old osprey perched on a tall pine stub perhaps a hundred feet above deep Paulina Lake. He was accustomed to sit for long intervals as immovable as a sphynx , barely turning his head, but one felt that his far-seeing eye had been probing the green depths below. All at once he plummeted down like a black arrow, went underneath and instantly up again, and swung high to eat his dinner. It was all so rapid that one could hardly tell how it happened. The old pine must have been his regular fishing perch for we seldom passed it without finding him at home.

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 the narrow perverse bridge over the river, we slowed down as we neared the osprey's aery. As usual all looked up. It was early. The light was fine and the air clear. 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 high up opposite the pinnacle where they could look into

the home. At this time of the morning 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. Soon 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 stunted pine across the river. The mother flew over to him, still crying as if begging him to do something about those two men so close to her nest and young. He said nothing as far as we could hear, but still sat undisturbed on the top of his watch tree. This went on for an hour, after which the mother got up courage enough to fly back and alight on her nest. 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 across the river 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 sky for a few minutes. The next time we looked he was back on his perch on the old pine. 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 so close down on the nest that no wisp of a feather showed. It looked like 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 monotonous 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. In the gravel and dry grass at the roadside busy insects were making homes in holes, laying eggs, and laboriously covering them

up with grains of sand, then to fly away and leave their offspring to their own destiny, be they good or injurious citizens of the insect world. A green dragonfly lighted near my foot and I saw the glistening iridescence of his body and his lacy wings..

I became aware of a shadow moving above me. The two old ospreys were floating together in the blue sky. There was no sound. Their fear of us had somewhat abated, but still they had not yet fed the young. The river hummed on and the mid-day sun poured down, two pairs of wide wings soared effortlessly, now hanging almost suspended, now floating, banking, and excellerating with no apparent wing movement- expert pilots of the air currents and the clouds.

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. At that time we passed under this same pinnacle with an osprey's nest on its top. That was in 1915, and the nest has been there and occupied and growing larger with each year. That was twenty-five years ago and when the nest was really begun we don't know.

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 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 splotched in brilliant browns and chocolates and lavenders.

The exciting climax in almost any family is when the children leave home, especially if the event is precipitated by an unexpected occurrence. We had intruded upon the privacy of the Gardiner River ospreys all too frequently and they

had become one of our best movie studies. We had hoped to see the final episode in their home life. But they are slow growing birds and the days dragged out with no end to this picture story. But at that, there is no better description of such an experience with these same birds than Vernon Bailey's in his "Wild Animals of Glacier National Park."

"Presently one of the old birds came to the nest, holding its long wings out 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 spell-bound 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."
