

Some insight into the action away from the nest

The young birds on Dennis' nest are now becoming accomplished fliers, and soon will be off on their own. This season at the nest has been full of interesting, revealing events as the annual drama of life and death in the breeding season of an osprey pair has unfolded in front of our camera. We have been fortunate to have an almost hour-by-hour diary during the season on our "observations" database, through the postings of many keen, dedicated observers. A number of the most interesting events during the season have been captured in video clips, posted on our "Highlight Clips" page. The editing of these clips, and the accompanying descriptions, have been the work of Tom Throwe and Dave Shore.

For the past several weeks, the birds have often been away from the nest and out of the camera's view. My wife Connie and I recently had a fascinating view of how young ospreys spend their time off the nest during this period. Earlier this month we spent a few days on our sailboat, cruising around Shelter Island. The first night out, around sunset, anchored in West Neck Harbor, we were sitting in the cockpit and heard a familiar raucous screech, seemingly right over our shoulders. A young osprey was perched at the top of our mast. As we looked around there were three ospreys: two fledglings and one adult. The two young ones were hopping from mast to mast among the anchored boats, while the adult watched from a distance. It appeared that the two young ones were learning to fly, and perhaps to fish, under the tutelage of a parent. It was amusing to note how the youngsters would flap furiously as they moved from one perch to another, while the adult soared effortlessly overhead.

After watching "our" chicks on the web cam learning to get airborne and venturing away from the nest, it was a pleasant surprise to get a first-hand view of the kind of activity they must be experiencing now, off-camera. We saw active osprey nests, with fledgling chicks, just about everywhere we went around Shelter Island. There were several in Cedar Island Cove (Coecles Harbor) adjacent to the Mashomack preserve. Mike Scheibel, wildlife manager for The Nature Conservancy at Mashomack, confirms that his staff are seeing a number of fledgling ospreys testing out their newly acquired skills. Mike also reports that, "to boot, we have been overseeing a fledgling bald eagle that seems to be having a rough time learning to make it on his own. His place of origin is unknown, but eagle biologists have suggested to me that he may be from the Chesapeake area. He has been taking advantage of food left for his use by friendly neighbors and seems to be gaining strength. The post-fledging period where young raptors learn to fend for themselves can be a most dangerous one."

Mike has passed along some results of the annual aerial survey of osprey activity on the east end of Long Island, carried out by the N.Y. State Department of Environmental Conservation. The survey covered some 110 nests where some 120+ young were present at the end of June. According to Mike, "this level of productivity represents a marked improvement ... it would seem that favorable weather conditions and an abundance of food added up to a better year."

For the coming weeks, we have invited commentaries from our experts in other regions of the country, Art Cooley in California and Marilyn Abbey in western New York, for their perspective on the state of the population of these marvelous birds. These will be posted in this space, beginning next Friday.

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