

Return of the Fish Hawks? 9-04

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North America's two fish hawks, the bald eagle and osprey, once commonly nested on Keuka Lake. Both are large birds with wingspans over 5 feet, the eagle with the white head and tail and black plumage, the osprey about 2/3 the size of an eagle with black and white head and plumage.



Osprey



Bald Eagle

Bald eagles and ospreys both eat mostly fish: the osprey swooping down to pluck live fish from the water; the eagle preferring to scavenge dead fish or rob ospreys of the fish they catch.

Both build large nest platforms in the branches of large dead trees: ospreys like to nest in trees close to or on the water; eagles preferring to nest in large, broken-topped white pine trees on hillsides overlooking lakes and rivers.

By the 1940's bald eagles and ospreys had largely disappeared from Keuka Lake (and other Finger Lakes) because their nesting trees were eliminated by farming, logging, and development and because their food supply was contaminated by the insecticide DDT. DDT was taken up by insects that were eaten by smaller fish. Larger fish ate the smaller fish, all the while concentrating the DDT. Ospreys and bald eagles ate the larger fish and received sufficiently large doses of DDT to affect their reproduction. Eagles and ospreys with high DDT concentrations in their tissues laid eggs with thin shells: when the birds tried to incubate their eggs they squashed them.

DDT was banned in 1971-2 and states like New York and Pennsylvania initiated "hacking" programs in the 1980's to reintroduce both birds to state waterways. Nestling eagles and ospreys were taken from areas out west with large populations of both birds, brought back east, and raised (hacked) on nesting platforms by volunteers who used gloves resembling eagle and osprey heads to feed the developing birds. After the birds left the nests and developed feeding territories, they flew south to winter but returned in succeeding springs to

establish their own nests and new breeding populations. These hacking programs were successful in restoring locally breeding populations of bald eagles and ospreys in New York. The most successful hacking programs were along Long Island, in the Catskills and Adirondacks, and, locally, in the Montezuma Swamp area between Rochester and Syracuse where both species currently nest. The hacking program was so successful that it was concluded in the late 1980's.

However, neither ospreys nor bald eagles are known to nest on Keuka Lake. The New York Breeding Bird Atlas lists only the osprey as a possible sighting on Keuka Lake for the 2002-2004 year period. This spring I observed an adult flying over our home on Keuka Lake just south of the Switzerland Inn, so ospreys at least perform "flyovers" on the lake.

What will it take to get Keuka's fish hawks back?

Other areas in New York and adjacent states have had good luck attracting **ospreys** by building nesting platforms on the shoreline or in the water. These birds do not avoid human contact: for many years I observed an active and successful osprey nest on one of these platforms scant feet from an active marina at Onoville on the Allegheny Reservoir. Platforms such as the one pictured have been erected by Boy Scout troops and other groups.

There's a good chance osprey young raised in the Montezuma area could fly over on their way south or north and decide to stay and raise families on Keuka Lake.



Osprey Nest Platform

Best sites for osprey nest platforms would be in the Keuka Lake State Park area, south end of Keuka Lake, Branchport end or perhaps along the bluff.

Eagles are more sensitive to human contact, plus they prefer to nest on overlooking hillsides in the large dead trees: it would be more of a challenge to get the eagles back.

If there is interest among KLA members to institute an osprey reintroduction program on Keuka Lake, please contact Margo at the KLA office. If there is enough interest, we can begin an osprey reintroduction program this fall (chiefly – build one or more nesting platforms).