



Ospreys, Plastics, and Marine Debris

Throughout the world, marine debris (specifically plastics) have become a serious problem in our oceans and coastal areas. In the estuaries of coastal New Jersey, marine debris and plastics are becoming more and more prevalent. Plastic does not degrade in the environment. It only breaks down into smaller pieces. It accumulates along the wrack line (on the higher portions of the marsh) where storm surges, high winds, and spring tides carry it to higher ground. This debris then makes its way into the nests of ospreys.



A female osprey carries a plastic bag to her nest. Photo by Howie Williams.

Currently there are approximately 675 pairs of nesting ospreys throughout New Jersey. Around 80% of population nest along the Atlantic Coast. While conducting surveys during the summer, CWF staff collects debris from all nests that are surveyed from Point Pleasant south along the coast to Atlantic City. We find all sorts of trash, most of it plastic (single use bags, Mylar and latex balloons, ribbon, monofilament, water bottles) and many other items, including a boomerang, shovel, football, American flags, and even money! Ospreys and their young can get entangled very easily and physically tied down to their nests by ribbon, rope and monofilament.

WHY DO OSPREYS USE TRASH AS NESTING MATERIAL?



We don't really know why ospreys use trash as nesting material but our best guess is that it is plentiful in the environment. One fact is that most ospreys collect nesting material from within view of their nest. Since plastic marine debris and natural nesting material (sticks, eelgrass, and grasses) tend to end up in the same higher portions of the marsh, they then take and use it all. Also, some birds can perceive ultraviolet light, which might make bright and shiny plastics (plastic bags, balloons, and ribbon) appear different and be more attractive to them. We don't yet know if trash plays any sort of role in their reproductive cycle, but we do know it's an emerging threat.

MARINE DEBRIS IS A PROBLEM WE CAN SOLVE TOGETHER!

Put litter in its place! Although marine debris is found worldwide, we can all help with the smallest actions to reduce the amount of debris found along our coastline. Reduce, reuse, recycle, and participate in local watershed, beach or stream cleanups. If we each do a little, together we can make a big difference.

Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting New Jersey's endangered and threatened wildlife and the habitats they depend on for survival. We accomplish this through research, habitat enhancement, conservation projects, education, and outreach programs that advance the protection of New Jersey's rarest residents.

Learn more: ConserveWildlifeNJ.org/osprey



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