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Osprey

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rarily capture the osprey and make it an official (trackable) subject of the CIRP. With the sun shining, the adult osprey circling the nest and two juveniles perched in the nest, Bierregaard and the assembled team prepared for the tagging.

The goal of the tagging process is to attach a metal band to the right leg of the osprey and harness a small transmitter with GPS capability to the back of the bird. The band contains the bird's identification number, along with a phone number and website address in case she is found by someone (usually meaning harm has come her way). The transmitter, about the size of an iPod, sits on the osprey much like a backpack and uses solar energy to transmit information and recharge. The device will enable Bierregaard to track Katy's migration patterns, food supplies and possible encounters.

Biologist vs. bird

With a ladder in place, Bierregaard climbed toward the nesting platform. His gear included climbing spikes strapped to his lower legs and a metal box with air holes hanging from his side. The plan was for Katy to be placed in the container temporarily as Bierregaard descended from the ladder.

Prior to his effort to tag Katy, Bierregaard voiced his suspicions that the two juvenile ospreys had never left the nest — meaning they had never taken flight. He predicted, however, that the situation would “all change in about 10 minutes.”

CIRP member Candy Powell called it “flying lessons by force.”

“When young ospreys take their first flight, it looks like they’ve been doing it forever,” Bierregaard said while gearing up. “But when they land, you can tell they haven’t. It’s pretty comical.”

With the banter done, Bierregaard soon got back to business.

Once he reached the platform, all of the osprey flew away, though Bierregaard came within inches of catching the young bird. When Katy returned to the nest, a mesh trap containing slipknots awaited her landing. When she landed on the mesh and tried to get away, her feet became tangled and she was caught. What followed was a short

struggle between biologist and bird, but after about 15 minutes, Bierregaard has his osprey.

“I don’t know who got who more,” Bierregaard said, adding that ospreys are still much nicer than owls.

Once on the ground, the juvenile osprey was measured at 1,740 grams, identified as a female (its large size was the determining factor), banded and named Katy, after the historic Rhode Island sloop.

A devotion to ospreys has consumed Bierregaard since 2000, after a chance opportunity came his way. The BBC and Animal Planet networks were searching for someone to take part in their series on the migration habits of ospreys. When asked if he knew anyone that would be interested in the project, Bierregaard expressed his own interest.

What motivates Bierregaard to stay involved in osprey research is his desire to increase “humans’ connections to animals,” he said. He is also motivated by the fact that the osprey is an icon of conservation and the coast; and — after near extinction in New England due to the now-banned pesticide DDT, which damaged osprey eggs by thinning their shells and hindering the birds’ ability to reproduce — he wants to be a part of the species’ renewal.

Some puzzling facts

As the osprey migration project has expanded, Bierregaard has discovered some interesting, as well as puzzling, facts about the osprey. Among the interesting facts are the migration habits of the adult osprey versus the habits of juveniles.

“The juveniles are all over the map — literally,” Bierregaard said. “The adults take the safe way, while the young will do 60 hours of non-stop flying.”

A juvenile’s first migration “is more instinct than actual navigation,” he added. “It is their dispersal, or exploratory phase.” An osprey’s second migration is much different, he said. With more knowledge of routes, weather and food, the osprey begins to use its navigation skills and flies with a plan in mind, according to Bierregaard.

The mysterious part of Bierregaard’s research revolves around the 80 percent mortality rate of juvenile osprey.

“The first year of an osprey’s life, natural selection does its job,” he said. But the how and why have yet to be determined, he added.

The high rate of death for young osprey makes it hard for the CIRP to find financial support for its efforts. One transmitter costs \$3,000 to 4,000. Add to that the nearly \$1,000 monthly cost for satellite time, and the total cost of tracking one osprey can approach \$5,000 or more.

“Not too many people are willing to risk that much money on a bird that may die in a month,” Bierregaard said.

Still, the CIRP has held fundraisers and applied for grants to keep its project going and growing. Also in partnership with the CIRP are the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, the Conanicut Island Land Trust, the Jamestown Conservation Committee, the Jamestown School Department, the town of Jamestown and the Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority. To date, three Jamestown ospreys have been successfully tagged and tracked due to the CIRP’s efforts.

Jamestown residents Don and Terri Coustan recently hosted a “Wine for Wings” fundraiser for CIRP. The proceeds from that event raised \$3,300, which enabled the CIRP to apply that money toward the cost of the transmitter for Katy. The group plans to hold another fundraiser in November to raise money to put toward the remaining cost of the transmitter and for satellite time costs.

The Coustans were also the muse behind the name “Katy.” They wanted a historical name that invoked Jamestown and the water, so the couple focused on the sloop “Katy,” which was originally owned by John Brown of Providence. The ship was eventually turned into a warship around 1775 and sailed Narragansett Bay throughout that summer, protecting the colonists and the colony’s coastal shipping.

After Katy was successfully tagged, she took to the skies, practicing her aerial moves with her nest mates. According to Chris Powell, Katy will begin her migration south around September — and most likely won’t return to Jamestown for two years. Information about the raptor project can be found on the CIRP website at www.conanicutraptors.com. The CIRP also hopes to get the Jamestown schools involved in tracking Katy via their website.

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