

# Ravens, ospreys making comeback

## Naturalists hail better habitat

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The common raven, which a century ago said "nevermore" to breeding in North Jersey, has given the region a second chance.

Two ravens who built a large nest tucked high into the rocky cliffs of Laurel Hill in Secaucus this year now have two offspring. One left the nest for the first time last week.

Meanwhile, local naturalists are encouraged by what could be only the second successful breeding pair of osprey in more than a quarter-century on the Hackensack River.

The return of both species indicates, at least for them, that environmental conditions are improving in North Jersey.

The ravens have become an attraction for visitors of Laurel Hill County Park. Jim Foley stops by many afternoons with a special treat for the birds — Fig Newtons with peanut butter.

"I love to watch the ravens because they're great fliers," Foley said. When they emerge from the nest to warn off an approaching red-tailed hawk, "it's

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Ravens nesting in the cliffs at Laurel Hill County Park in Secaucus are the proud parents of two offspring.

## Birds: Comebacks

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like something out of a World War I dogfight."

Pat Murphy of the Hudson County Division of Parks has seen them battle the hawks. "The hawks come in and buzz them," he said. "I think they do it just to bust their chops."

Ken Witkowski, president of the Bergen County Audubon Society, first spotted a raven's nest in North Jersey late in 2004 when conducting a bird study in the Meadowlands. The ravens have been breeding for three or four years now along the Palisades.

"They're beginning to thrive here, which is always good news," Witkowski said.

Ravens are large black scavengers that can kill their own small prey but are just as happy to take the easy route and feast on road kill. "If you're in raven territory and you're driving down a road you're likely to see a raven flying straight at you, just above car height," said Kevin McGowan, with Cornell University's Lab of Ornithology. "They know all about road kill. They'll follow the painted middle lines of a road for miles."

The birds, which have an iconic presence in American literature through such works as the eponymous poem by Edgar Allan Poe, are bigger than crows, with a wingspan reaching 4½ feet.

Once a common sight in the Northeast, they disappeared for more than 100 years as deforestation decimated their breeding grounds, McGowan said. They retreated north to Canada.

Ravens are hardy and live in permanent pairs. They lay eggs far earlier than other birds, often in late February, so the young would be about ready to leave the nest at this point. "The young birds are fairly social — they'll

cluster into big flocks with other young birds for a year or so," McGowan said.

While ravens like to space themselves out every 10 miles or so, ospreys are less fussy.

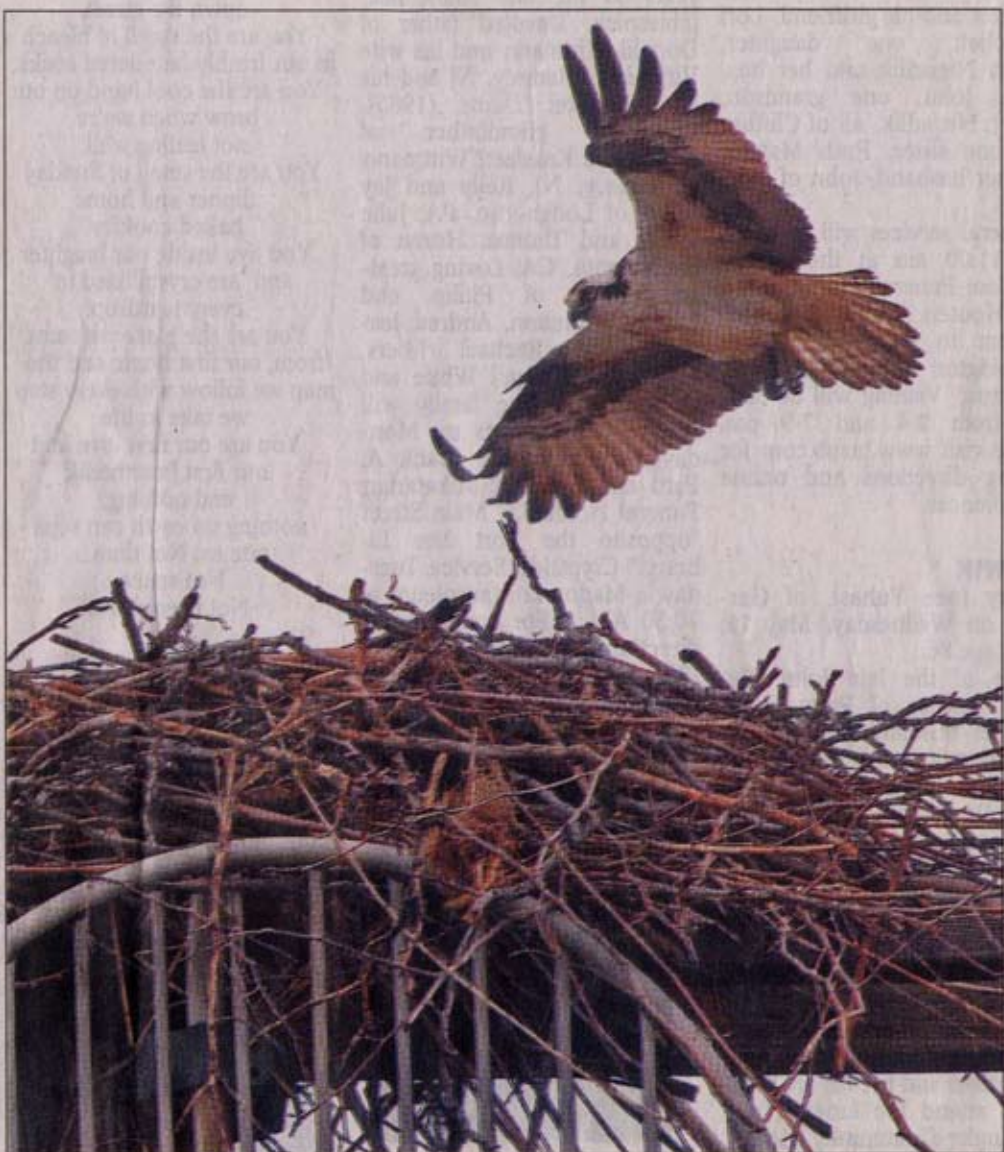
Ospreys, a type of fish hawk slightly smaller than eagles, had declined precipitously in the 1960s as the use of the pesticide DDT worked its way into the water and contaminated fish, the ospreys' sole food supply. Ospreys ingested DDT from the fish, and it caused them to lay eggs with such thin shells the eggs were crushed under the weight of the mother.

The Hackensack River, meanwhile, presented its own problems for the osprey. Pollution from sewage plants and toxic waste sites caused the river's oxygen levels to drop, depleting the fish population.

But the ospreys have rebounded since DDT was banned. Sewage plants along the Hackensack have been upgraded and development has slowed, allowing oxygen levels in the water to improve and the fish population to recover.

Osprey return to the same nests each year after wintering in the Caribbean and South America. New Jersey had tried to reintroduce the birds to shore areas, but there were no osprey nests along the Hackensack River until a pair started a nest in Jersey City near the PSE&G plant a few years ago.

This spring, Jim Wright of the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission spotted North Jersey's second active nest, on a remote spot along the Hackensack near the eastern spur of the New Jersey Turnpike. A recent visitor saw an osprey sitting on the nest while another stood guard on an adjacent power line tower, indi-



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An osprey returning to its nest on a metal tower along the Hackensack River.

ating that eggs were present.

The ospreys on the Hackensack built their big, messy nest on top of an old bridge control room. A tall antenna sticks up from the nest, as if the birds are getting a premium TV service. Along with sticks, they wove swatches of opaque plastic into their nest.

Below the nest, the ground is strewn with old plastic bottles

and the carcass of an abandoned air conditioner. In the sky just to the west, commercial airplanes swoop down toward Newark Liberty International Airport. Along the riverbank, the air is filled with the trill of red-winged blackbirds and the groan of 18-wheelers on the turnpike above.

"The osprey is the perfect poster child for the environmen-

tal activism of the 1960s. Its recovery is a result of such legislation as the Clean Water Act," McGowan said.

"We get tied up thinking we're destroying the world, but we did the bulk of that a hundred years ago. We've reforested parts of the Northeast, and we're cleaning up our act. At least for the raven and the osprey, we're getting things better."