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# To catch a nestling osprey

**GPS backpacks help park learn about migratory birds.**

*By Cory Hatch, Jackson Hole, Wyo.*
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The 8-week-old osprey seems poised to fly as Lower Valley Energy lineman Dave Renbarger expertly maneuvers the arm of the cherry picker under the nest.

The bird flaps its wings with powerful strokes but doesn't let go of the pile of sticks perched at the top of the modified telephone pole. After a moment, the bird settles down again.

The juvenile osprey is almost too old for this type of capture to work.

"It's a fine line between getting them at the right size and having them fly out of the nest," says Grand Teton National Park senior wildlife biologist Steve Cain, who is watching below near the Granite Canyon Entrance Station.

Renbarger moves the bucket of the cherry picker to the south side of the pole so biologist Bryan Bedrosian is in position to stop an avian getaway into the wind.

Overhead, one of the osprey's parents cries out, "Kyew, kyew, kyew, kyew, kyew," periodically checking the nest and then soaring back around the sky in wide circles. Bedrosian and Renbarger are probably safe from a parental assault, Cain says.

"Luckily, osprey aren't one of the species that will routinely hit when you're in the nest," he says.

When the timing is just right, Bedrosian, a bird expert with the Kelly-based research group Craighead Beringia South, eases the net over the side of the nest. With a flick of the wrist, he traps the flapping osprey and a sibling, which is hunkered down in the sticks.

Bedrosian then places little leather hoods over the birds' heads to cover their eyes. Once the hoods are in place, the captured osprey become almost docile.

Onlookers release a collective sigh of relief.

Cain enlisted Bedrosian to capture the osprey as part of a larger effort to track the park's migrating animals.

"You want to make sure you conserve these animals in the long run, so you need to learn about their migrations," Cain says.

With luck, Cain and Bedrosian will fit the larger nestling with a GPS transmitter that will beam back thousands of locations over the next several years.

The health of the winter habitat — in this case, likely the southern United States, Mexico or Cuba — is just as important in ensuring a migratory species' survival as its habitat in the national park. Where the birds stop along the way, called transitional habitat, also is important.

Cain steps up on the cherry picker to take one of the birds for measuring, banding and fitting of the transmitter, and Bedrosian produces a white egg mottled with

brown spots that look like dirt. The egg is a dud; for some reason, it failed to develop into a viable chick.

Once the birds are safely on the ground, Bedrosian places metal bands on the feet of the smaller bird, takes a blood sample and measures its wings, claws and beak. The smaller bird's tail features are noticeably shorter than those of the bird that threatened to fly.

The larger bird's feathers are almost fully developed.

"This one's ready," Cain says.

Bedrosian likes to wait until nestlings are almost adult-size to put on the solar-powered backpack tracking devices. That way, the birds don't outgrow the straps. As an added protection, Bedrosian used some elastic material in the backpacks' straps to give the birds some wiggle room as they add muscle into adulthood.

"With the nestlings, you want a little more forgiveness since they're still growing," he says. "It's good this one is so big; it makes him easy to fit."

Bedrosian is careful with how the backpack transmitter fits, readjusting the straps several times before using needle-nose pliers to clamp down on metal rings, securing the device in place. Even Cain, an accomplished raptor researcher in his own right, defers to the younger biologist's expertise.

"This is where experience really counts," Cain says. Fitting the transmitter "is a really critical part of the procedure."

A specially designed piece of the harness — a breakaway stitch — will deteriorate after about three years, and the backpack will fall off.

Until then, researchers will get two to three locations a day from the transmitter on the larger osprey's back.

In May, two of three osprey captured and fitted with satellite tracking devices in Grand Teton National Park last September returned after migrating thousands of miles to Mexico and Cuba, respectively. The third osprey, a juvenile female, was still alive and well near San Antonio.

Such will likely be the pattern of the two osprey Bedrosian captures today.

"They'll spend one entire year in their wintering area," Cain says. "They'll come back to us as 2-year-olds, ready to breed."

Overhead, another osprey parent appears with a fish in its claws. It lands in the nest, then takes off again, apparently confused to find its young missing. It approaches its mate in a tree a couple hundred yards away and attempts what looks like an awkward handoff of the fish.

After the final measurements of the larger juvenile are complete, Bedrosian prepares to put it back.

"All right, I think they're ready to go home," he says.

The researchers aren't worried about the parents rejecting their young. Most birds don't have a sense of smell — turkey vultures being the obvious exception — and the popular conception that parents won't accept young if you pick them up is a myth.

If Bedrosian has any luck, the parents will be the next birds captured. He and Cain are trying to capture families to see if there is a genetic component to migration.

Back in the cherry picker, Renbarger eases Bedrosian into position. The osprey are released, and the parents land back in the nest to inspect their offspring, a family

reunited.

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