

BOREAL BITS

PHIL BURKE



THE EAGLE AND THE OSPREY

"You can observe a lot just by watching." Yogi Berra

Some times the situation is such that being in the right place at the right time is very easy. Take the jobs Ray Hanstead, Dave Nachuk and Gord St. Dennis have at the sewage treatment plant located on the Winnipeg River across from Old Fort Island. For two men who love observing nature at her best, you can't beat this location. Not three hundred metres from the facility gate is an osprey nest and across from the plant on Old Fort Island is an eagle nest, a relatively new structure established last year. As of this writing, a healthy eaglet is maturing on the nest. This team of observers often informs me of interesting events occurring near their place of work, but nothing prepared me for the story Ray and Gord related regarding an incident that took place on May 27, one of the few warm, bright dry days we experienced during the spring. On this date at about 11 a.m., they heard a commotion caused by incessant cawing of crows near the gate of the treatment facility. It was enough to cause them to investigate. They saw four crows engaged in a shouting-flying match with a mature bald eagle. As they approached the gate they realized that another eagle was standing on the back of an osprey that lay face down with

wings spread on the ground. The airborne eagle and crows fled the scene but not the other two birds. As the men watched, they twice observed the eagle and osprey rise slightly into the air and then slam back to the ground. Whether this was caused by the action of the eagle or the efforts of the osprey is not clear.

Realizing that the osprey was in serious trouble they ran toward the birds, an action that caused the eagle to flee. Gord went to the office to call the Ministry and a message was relayed to wildlife technician Lil Anderson, the name behind the local wildlife rehabilitation facility.



Ray had experienced a wounded eagle once before and found that covering its head would quiet it. He tried this with the osprey but the bird glared at him in such a way he figured he would pass on that idea. As Ray and Gord watched, the osprey panted for breath. After about ten minutes it had regained enough strength to pull in its wings and perch on the ground. Still panting heavily it waited another ten minutes before it flew off very low to the ground, landing in a large pine tree a few hundred metres down the road. There it remained against the trunk for the rest of the day and all of the next day, Friday. It was there when Lil Anderson arrived and I'm sure she was thankful that it had recovered enough to fly off. On Saturday morning when Ray arrived for work,

the osprey was gone. He checked around the base of the tree but there was no sign of the bird. To muddy the story further, Ray and Gord saw three adult ospreys on that day.

Bald eagles are great robbers of fish from ospreys. The lucky observer has seen eagles harass ospreys to the extent that the smaller bird drops its catch that is then caught by the attacking eagle before it hits the water. Ben Franklin had this to say, "I wish that the bald eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country (U.S.A.), he is a bird of bad moral character, he does not get his living honestly, you may have seen him perched on some dead tree, where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches the labor of the fishing-hawk, and when that diligent bird has at length taken a fish, and is bearing it to its nest for the support of his mate and young ones, the bald eagle pursues him and takes it from him..." Eagle attacks on the osprey itself are not nearly as common.



From Ray's description of the osprey, it was a male. Females do the incubating and brooding while the male catches fish for all of them and with the male gone, survival of the clutch would be in great jeopardy.

Then there was the third adult osprey that muddled the story. It is possible that this was an unattached bird that was passing by. Although ospreys sometimes nest in close proximity to other ospreys, no other nests have been located. Within a square half-kilometre, this area of the Winnipeg River is home to three active bald eagle nests and an osprey nest. It is a credit to the environment that it can produce enough fish to feed the adults and young from these four nests because although eagles will feed off carrion and other food sources (ducks, gulls, etc) the majority of their diet is fish.

And when push comes to shove in a dispute between the two birds, the larger, heavier and more aggressive eagle will win every time.