



Prologue

Candace E. Cornell
Salt Point, April 2014

Song of the Osprey

*very nearly we have lopped
the branches off supporting us all.
so branch by branch then;
by feather and fish and leaf
we must retrieve them all,
renew them all
because the thrill of wild things
is a measure of our pulse.*

—Michael Harris¹

To get to know an osprey, *REALLY* get to know one, requires that you sit for long hours of daily observation from April until the end of September and study their every movement and that of its family. Most people wouldn't spend that much time in such a pursuit, but I gave it a go last summer (2013) at Salt Point, recording data on the lives of these magnificent birds. I observed from about 7:30 a.m. until sunset non-stop, everyday, rain or shine or snow, from the first day the male on April 20, 2013, which I nicknamed Orpheus, arrived at Salt Point until September 21, 2013, when he, the last of the family to leave, began his 3-4,000 mile migration to the Caribbean and points as far south as Brazil. After so many hours absorbed by these birds, you eventually find yourself slowing down until you match the osprey's pace or "osprey time."

However, you do not have to be a rabid osprey-phile like me to appreciate and enjoy the family life of these majestic creatures. Casual nest watching at Salt Point, especially during the adults' courtship and once the chicks have hatched, is enough to convert most visitors into life-long osprey fans, giving them a delightful excuse to get outdoors and hike to Salt Point. Surrounded by birdsong, ospreys flying overhead, the lapping of the waves, and smells of the lake, one starts to slow down and enjoy the simple passage of time.

After observing behaviors of ospreys and other birds for many years, it is clear to me that our two species share much in common. These similarities were not lost on the countless visitors to Salt Point's ospreys last summer. Each osprey is a unique individual with its own behavioral patterns, and yet as a mated pair, they become a team, cooperating together with astounding synchrony to create and raise the next generation. Throughout the breeding season in Lansing, the osprey work continually caring for their families and improving the nests. Like them, the people of the Town of Lansing and NYSEG (who constructed the nesting platform) care for their community and opened their hearts in 2013 to build a fine home for this new Salt Point family.

I am at Salt Point again this spring and summer (2014) watching, photographing, and writing about all the drama in and around the ospreys' nest as their lives playing out in front of us. I look forward to meeting all the visitors again that came to see the ospreys last year and many new ones! Let's hope this year is as overwhelmingly successful as last year was when our first-time parents were able to raise and fledge three chicks—a huge number for the newly weds and a testament to the quality of fish in Cayuga Lake.

The following weekly blog recounts my days spent "living on osprey time²" this summer and last at Salt Point, Lansing, NY, on the shores of Lake Cayuga. It features many of my photographs and those of talented guest artists and is based on the latest scientific data, hundreds of hours of daily observations at the nest site, and a little imagination (where indicated).

I hope, after reading this, you will be tempted to walk out to the Salt Point osprey platform to see what all the fuss is about for yourself. The nest platform is also visible from the Salmon Creek shoreline in Myers Park, which is accessible by car. In the meanwhile, read and enjoy “because the thrill of wild things is a measure of our pulse.”

Candace

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Candace Cornell, an avid birder and naturalist, retired from the Lab of Ornithology in 2006 after working in the biological sciences at Cornell for 27 years. She recently moved from Ithaca to Lansing with her family to be closer to the lake and the ospreys at Salt Point.



Photo courtesy of Dan Veaner, [Lansing Star](#).

¹*Song to Ospreys: Photographs, Poems, and Short Stories on the Northern California Coast*, (1990): Michael Harris. Master's Theses. Paper 52.

²A term coined by Dr. Alan Poole in *Ospreys: A Natural and Unnatural History*, 1989.

Why Like Ospreys?

Why do people find ospreys so captivating? Is it their jaw-dropping majesty and elegance, their fascinating behaviors, aerial acrobatics, or the ease of watching their lives play before us? Or is it their surprising array of human-like traits? For some people, ospreys are canaries in the coalmine, the indicator species that tells us the health of our water and our entire ecosystem. Osprey chicks raised exclusively on fish from the waters of Cayuga Lake mirror the water's purity. Thus the contamination status of the chicks directly correlates with the toxin load of the fish and everything the fish are exposed to in the Lake. The fact that osprey populations are increasing, and young osprey, born and bred on Cayuga Lake, are now returning speaks volumes for the health of the Lake. They also represent hope for the environment in the form of the classic phoenix bird, rising from the ashes of destruction to live another day.

The ospreys at Salt Point are a real success story—one of cooperation and achievement, of energetic volunteers and a generous business, of a willing town government and a people who opened their hearts to these magnificent birds. Last but not least, it is about some very lucky Ospreys who made a killing in the real estate market. Location, location!