

ABOUT BOOKS

The Lessons of Living on Osprey Time

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Return of the Osprey: A Season of Flight and Wonder. 2001.
David Gessner. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. 288 pages. \$23.95.

David Gessner is an essayist, not a nature writer. He made this point abundantly clear in an interview I conducted with him. David resists being pigeon-holed into any one narrow genre of writing. It is because of this outsider attitude toward his subject matter, that he has written one of the most unique, interesting, and thoughtful books on New England birds and the nature of Cape Cod.

Leaving Colorado with his wife, Nina, and returning to live in his family home on Sesuit Neck on Cape Cod, David's life is in a period of transition. He is in remission from testicular cancer and in the midst of the inevitable reevaluation of his life. His father has recently passed away and memories continue to haunt him. All of their friends are left behind on the Front Range of Colorado. He has returned to his family's home both for a change of scenery and for the practical reason that it offers a cheap place to live. David and Nina have the house to themselves except during the summer, when the extended family returns. While walking out on a jetty in spring, David surprises an Osprey at a nest and immediately becomes intrigued. He is fascinated by the simple dramatic presence of such a large raptor. He also sees in the Osprey a symbol of hope and the ability to come back from the precipice of extinction.

But more than lessons I simply want to be close. If these birds were once so common, why does it feel like a miracle that they have come back now? Perhaps it's because even the plain facts of the coming Spring are miraculous. Almost gone from these parts forever, the Osprey has rejoined life's circle. They will be arriving any day now and I feel poised, ready. Excited by sights I'll soon see, I let the coming season infect me. I share the world's anticipation. Eager to begin [p.14].

David sets himself the task of observing for one complete season several pairs of Osprey that have returned to nest in the marshes between Dennis and Brewster. He starts by reading everything he can find on Ospreys and soon becomes a self-taught Ospreyphile. His plan is to plant himself in a chair on the edge of a salt marsh every morning and keep a diary of what he sees as the Ospreys attend their nests. He has never done anything like this before and initially finds the task of these daily observations daunting because for hours at a time nothing seems to happen at the nest. He is also humbled by the sheer complexity of everything else that is going on in the marshes.



Spending time in nature produces, among other results, a general feeling of stupidity, constantly reminding you of the thousands of obvious facts you don't know [p.16].

David gets to know ornithologist Alan Poole, one of the world's authorities on the Osprey. Alan tells David that he must change his expectations of what he wants to observe. David has to adjust the pace of his life to the pace of his subjects.

I've forced myself to do many things before, though these things have usually been of the active variety. Now I will stay still. Despite myself, I will live on Osprey time [p.102].

The book then chronicles one season of David's careful and very personal observations of his local nesting Ospreys. As David learns the art of watching nature, every minute detail of Osprey life holds some interest. An entire chapter details the building of an Osprey nest, many of which are huge and complicated messy structures. He lists the contents of his Ospreys' nests, one of which contains a Barbie doll. At one point he wonders if indeed it is a Barbie doll and not a Spice Girls doll. He longs to actually watch the exact moment when an Osprey dives in the water to catch a fish. We get to know each nesting pair intimately as David gets to know them, following them through egg laying, feeding of the young birds, fledging, and eventual migration.

Through all of this, we are privy to David's inner evolution as he tries to make sense of what he is seeing and attempts to integrate this information into his life. This is not as clearcut or facile as it appears in most so-called nature books because David has no idea where this is all leading. He is not even very clear as to why he is doing all this. Every chapter glistens with an honest and humble sense of excited discovery. A pivotal moment occurs as he watches one nestling viciously kill the runt of the nest. In a moment of enlightenment, David questions all the previous anthropomorphic ideas he has had about the Ospreys. Although he believes the death of the nestling originated in an instinctual yearning for life, in the end he realizes that he can gain no human meaning at all from the event. Nature can only be understood on its own terms.

Return of the Osprey is one of the most original books I have read about how humans look at the natural world, give these observations meaning, and then integrate these feelings into their day-to-day life. This book contains an enormous amount of information about the life of the Osprey and much of it will be new to the reader. Equally important, it is also about the mind of the observer. Through the eyes and writings of David Gessner, we can begin to learn what it means to see the natural world on its own terms.

To see, to look for long moments without preconception, to watch without judgment, that may be the beginning of deeper understanding. If we can quiet thought and see, then, our minds refreshed, better thought will come to us, and this must hold true for both the scientist and artist [p.147]. 