

OBSERVATIONS OF A MELANISTIC OSPREY IN SOUTHWEST FLORIDASTEPHEN A. NESBITT¹ AND JOE MCNICHOLS²¹*Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 4005 South Main Street,
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Clark (1998) provides a description and photograph of a melanistic Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) from the area of Chokoloskee in Collier County on 4 March 1997. His was only the second recorded instance of abnormal coloration in Ospreys; the other, also a melanistic individual, was seen in France (see Clark 1998). Neither Palmer (1988) nor Brown and Amadon (1968) mention atypical plumages for Ospreys. Clark states the bird "had been observed regularly in the same area of mangrove islands over the past [from 1997] three years by Frank and Georgia Garrett." We report subsequent sightings of a melanistic individual (Fig. 1) from this same area of southwest Florida.



Figure 1. Melanistic Osprey, Collier County, Florida, 15 May 2002.

From a distance, resting or in flight, the bird appeared to be generally dark chocolate-brown, suggestive of a first-year Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). We were able to study and photograph this individual, while it was perched, from a distance of 200 meters on 15 May 2002. The head, back, breast, and belly were dark brown with a few scattered lighter brown feathers, in no obvious pattern. The feathers of the nape and rear crown were attenuated so when seen in profile the bird had the typical Osprey crest. Wings also were dark, but when seen from below some barring was apparent. The upper lesser wing coverts were lighter in color giving the bird a reddish-brown shoulder. The tail was lighter with marked barring and appeared nearly normal. Leg, bill, and cere color appeared to be normal. Iris color was a greenish yellow in contrast to either the "pure yellow" of females or "yellow with a slight orange tint" of males (Ogden 1977). Voice, behavior, and food habits seemed typical for an Osprey.

We have seen this bird regularly in the 10,000 Islands area SSW of Chokoloskee. McNichols saw the bird multiple times during March, April and May 2000, 2001, and 2002. We saw the bird together 4 May 2001, then again 15 May 2002. In April 2002 McNichols observed the bird constructing a nest. The nest site was in a dead red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*) on a small island on the south side of the Chokoloskee Pass. Clark (1998) reports the bird built a nest in 1997 and three years previous (1994) in this same area at "... the western end of Everglades National Park, approximately 5 km south southwest of the town of Chokoloskee" [did he say where? same area?].

It is likely that the bird we saw is the same individual described by Clark. We could find no written reference to the bird being seen between Clark's sighting and our sightings, though it is likely the bird was in the area between these observations. This means this individual has been in the area for at least 8 years. Clark did not report aerial courtship displays and we did not see any, suggesting that this bird may be a female. The only intraspecific interactions we have seen were agonistic, i.e. territorial defense. Although it has built nests (or added to an existing nest) for several years, neither Clark, nor we, saw the bird with a mate. As Clark suggests, the dark plumage without contrasting white markings may impede successful pair bonding in this individual. If this bird eventually succeeds in reproducing, the plumage coloration of any resultant young would be noteworthy.

LITERATURE CITED

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