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GROUND-NESTING OSPREYS IN UTAH

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Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) utilize an array of both natural and artificial nesting sites. Frequently-chosen nesting sites include tree tops, rock pinnacles, utility poles, and elevated nesting platforms (Bent 1937). Ground nests are also common, but are restricted to small coastal islands where mammalian predators are absent (Poole 1989). Ospreys do not nest on the ground on the North American mainland where the likelihood of mammalian predation is high (Palmer 1988). In 1999, however, I witnessed a pair of ground-nesting Ospreys in Utah. The following account is perhaps the first recorded incident of ground-nesting Ospreys in the interior of North America.

Ospreys are historically rare breeders in Utah, where only three to four lakes and reservoirs traditionally support nesting pairs (Hayward et al. 1976). Beginning in 1995, they have colonized numerous additional water bodies, particularly in the northern portion of the state (Monson 1996).

On 5 May 1999, while viewing a pair of Ospreys on a nesting platform at Deer Creek Reservoir, Wasatch county (Fig. 1), I noticed a second pair of Ospreys standing on an extensive mud flat 30 m from the water's edge at the upper end of the reservoir. Several days later, the two birds were seen again in the same location. While I observed them, the male flew a short distance over the reservoir, collected some floating plant material, deposited it on the ground near the female, and copulated with her. On 9 May, the female appeared to be in an incubation posture, yet I could not see a nest structure from an elevated road <300 m away. On 10 May, I found the nest. The female flushed when I approached within 100 m and was clearly not handicapped in any way. The nest consisted of approximately 30 sticks encircling a thin mat of dried grass. It had apparently been depredated since only a large fragment of eggshell remained. On 12 May, the female was again seen incubating. A return visit to the nest revealed a newly laid, intact egg (Fig. 2). Several days later, however, the Ospreys moved to a new ground site 60 m away, presumably in response to persistent predator molestation. Bailing twine was the only nesting material they brought to the new nest site. An egg was laid on 18 May, but on 19 May it was missing. Nesting activity ceased with the loss of this third and final egg, but the adults remained in the immediate area, continuing to stand on

the mud flat near their former nest sites rather than perching in nearby trees.

While Ospreys nest successfully on the ground on coastal islands, the ground-nesting pair in Utah was ultimately destined to fail. Mammalian predators, especially striped skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*), raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), and red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) are abundant near the reservoir. Moreover, the nesting area is flooded in late May when

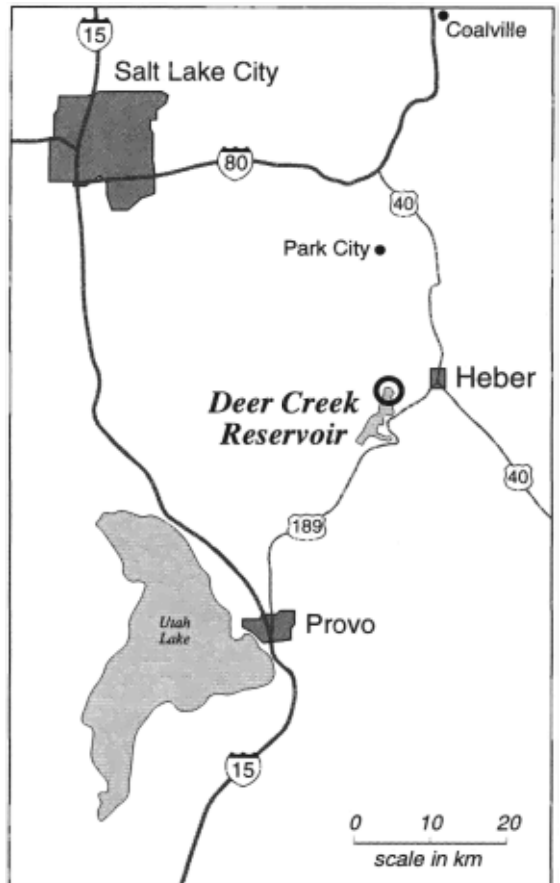


Figure 1. Map that shows the location of Deer Creek Reservoir. The circle at the northern tip of the reservoir identifies the location of the Osprey ground nest. The nest site was inundated shortly after the cessation of egg laying.



Figure 2. Osprey ground nest located at Deer Creek Reservoir, Utah. The large forked limb in the photo is grounded drift material that was already present when the Ospreys selected the nest site.

spring runoff elevates the water level of Deer Creek Reservoir. At full capacity, which is normally attained in early June, Deer Creek Reservoir is approximately 3 m deep where the Ospreys were nesting (Fig. 2). Interestingly, the ground nest sites were selected over a vacant artificial nest platform 400 m away, utility poles, and a suitable snag <1 km away which was used by a pair of Ospreys that appeared suddenly in late June. The choice of ground nests over potential elevated sites in an area highly populated with mammalian predators and sparsely inhabited by other Ospreys is highly unusual for the species and constitutes a singular and most confounding nesting event.

RESÚMEN.—Las águilas pescadoras (*Pandion haliaetus*) que anidan en el suelo generalmente se encuentran restringidas a islas libres de depredadores. Sin embargo en 1999 una pareja de águilas pescadoras anidaron en el suelo en el reservorio de Deer Creek, Utah, en donde los depredadores mamíferos son abundantes. La depredación del sitio del nido durante la postura ocasionó su fracaso.

[Traducción de César Márquez]

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