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First North American Record of a Melanistic Osprey

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ABSTRACT—The first melanistic Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) for North America (second for the world) is described and shown. It was seen and photographed in southern Florida on 4 March 1997. Received 25 Aug. 1997, accepted 13 Jan. 1998.

The Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus*, in spite of its world-wide distribution, shows little geographic or individual variation in its plumage (Poole 1989, del Hoyo et al 1994). None of the regional bird handbooks; e.g., for the Western Palearctic (Cramp and Simmons 1980), for Africa (Brown et al 1982), for North America (Palmer 1988), or for Australia (Marchant and Higgins 1993); mention any aberrant plumages for the Osprey. Recently, Millon (1994) briefly described a melanistic Osprey seen in France. Herein I describe the first melanistic individual of this species for North America. A dark Osprey had been observed regularly in the same area of mangrove islands over the past three years by Frank and Georgia Garrett on their daily boat tours out of Chokoloskee, Florida. They took me to see this unusual bird and I observed and photographed it for over three hours on the afternoon of 4 March 1997.

As seen in Fig. 1, the head, underparts, and underwing coverts of this Osprey are dark brown, with some buffy markings visible on the underparts. The head is uniformly dark; the black eye-line of Ospreys with normal plumage is not noticeable, even at close range. The pale undersides of the flight feathers differ from those of normal Ospreys (Wheeler and Clark 1995) in that they lack any dark barring. The eye and leg colors and tail color and pattern are the same as those of normal Ospreys, as are its vocalizations.

When I first saw this unusual bird, it was standing on a typical Osprey nest on a small mangrove island in the western end of Ever-

glades National Park, approximately 5 km ssw of the town of Chokoloskee. The Garretts told me that they saw this bird build the nest. Another nest that it had built on an adjacent island was taken over by a pair of Ospreys in normal plumage three years previously.

Terres (1980) considers melanism to be an abnormal plumage, whereas Gross (1965) and Sage (1962) consider that there are both “normal” and “abnormal” melanism—normal being that of polychromatic species, with the dark birds comprising the dark morph, and abnormal being that of monochromatic species. Gross (1965) reported melanism, both normal and abnormal, in only 29 species of North American birds.

I never saw this dark bird in the company of another Osprey. I watched it hunt for more than 5 minutes on two forays—hovering for a while in one location and then moving to another, in typical Osprey fashion. On one foray, it caught a fish and took it to a perch and ate the fish entirely, not sharing with another Osprey. The Garretts have never, in more than three years of observations, seen this bird in regular close association with another Osprey, as would be expected if it were mated.

Plumage color has little effect on mate selection in polychromatic species, because most individuals of these species mate randomly regardless of color morph. The dark coloration of birds like this unusual Osprey may obscure plumage features necessary for mating, e.g., the dark carpal patches on white underwings of Ospreys in normal-plumage [see Olsen (1995) for a discussion of plumage social signals.]. It is also possible that species that are polychromatic are so because in the past aberrant individuals were able to mate with normal birds and thus pass on their dark genes, which are usually dominant when heterozygous (Sage 1962). Monomorphic species would remain so when the occasional melanistic individuals cannot mate and pass on their genes.

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FIG. 1. First melanistic Osprey recorded in North America.

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