

# Blue Cypress Lake: Osprey central

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FELLSMERE — The young male osprey was showing off, plain and simple.

Gleefully, he circled the towering centuries-old cypress trees on warming air currents as he firmly grasped a large, plump shad in his right talon.

The chirps and tweets of other ospreys could be heard all around him.

Some likely were calling out to congratulate him; others might have been trash talking him. Regardless, he didn't seem to mind as he soared atop the canopy on a sunny spring morning.

After a few minutes of letting all his neighbors know what he had caught, the osprey swooped into a well-built nest 30 feet off the surface of the water. Two white and brown heads popped up from beneath the nest's rim, next to the male's mate, eager to taste a fresh shad brunch.

Blue Cypress Lake, a natural freshwater lake situated in western Indian River County, could not be more aptly named.

Tens of thousands of bald cypress trees reaching as high as 100 feet tall ring the 6,555 acre lake.

The lake is a trove of Treasure Coast wildlife, birds and freshwater fish and is visited frequently by anglers, birders, airboaters and in the fall, alligator hunters.

During spring time, the waterway is dominated by the presence of the sometimes noisy raptors engaged in activities ranging from construction to fishing to caring for chicks.

The lake always has had a reputation for its wonderful display of wildlife, but local observers have embarked on a project they hope will quantify the rich abundance of ospreys.

## **IF I HAD A HAMMER**

This year, the Pelican Island Audubon Society received a grant to catalog and map as many osprey nests as they could find.

Over the past two weeks, Richard Baker, a retired researcher and former director of the Florida Medical Entomology Lab, in Vero Beach, and fellow PIAS members Susan Boyd, Bob Bruce and Bill Loftus nailed small aluminum forestry tags to cypress tree trunks along the water's edge.

When they finished, they had tagged 298 trees that contained active osprey nests on the shore of a lake that is only 4 1/2 miles long and just over 3 miles wide.

According to an osprey researcher in New Hampshire, Blue Cypress Lake could host the highest concentration of active osprey nests in the world.

The foursome marked trees with nests at any stage of the nesting process, from just being constructed to chicks nearing fledgling stage.

After a tree was located, Bruce, 63, piloted his deck boat up to each tree trunk. Loftus, 63, seated in one of the boat's chairs on its foredeck, would grasp the tree, a cypress knee (root) or vine on the tree to help hold position. Baker, 78, seated in the other foredeck chair, nailed a quarter-sized tag etched with a number to the trunk or a knee. Boyd, 70, would get as close to the tree as possible to save the exact position on a handheld GPS.

The team worked seamlessly despite sometimes windy conditions and waves on the lake, vines of poison ivy draped around cypress trunks, spider webs and carpenter ants. Baker and Loftus only dropped three tags into the water and Baker drove in nails as efficiently as a roofer.

“My wife (Juanita) and I began coming out to Blue Cypress Lake in 1991 and fell in love with canoeing here,” Baker said. “This project started out with just trying to figure out how many nests are out here and how many are being used.

“Tagging the trees will enable researchers to look at it for a period of time. Using GPS, we can map out each individual nest. That may open up the door for all kinds of science where we can look at seasonality, timing, effects of global warming and more.”

Baker said one day the area could be designated as an Important Bird Area.

There already are theories that some of the Blue Cypress ospreys are from other locations in Florida and others could migrate as far as South America.

## **BIRDWATCHING IS BUSINESS**

The birds of Blue Cypress, including other birds of prey such as bald eagles, waterfowl and wading birds, are attracting as many photographers as the bass, bluegill and catfish are attracting anglers.

In Florida, birding and seeing wildlife in its native habitat are big business.

According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the state’s economy is bolstered by \$5.8 billion in revenue generated by wildlife tours and residents and visitors heading out on their own.

Surveys conducted by the agency in 2011 revealed that 49 percent of Floridians (9.3 million) and 47 percent of visitors (39 million) participated in wildlife viewing activities. That placed it second only to going to the beach for Florida-based activities.

Blue Cypress Lake is listed on the FWC’s 515-location, 2,000-mile long Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail. It can be found in the “Blue Cypress Conservation Area” in the trail’s Eastern Florida region.

Mike Cohen is a retired attorney from Lighthouse Point, in Broward County, who counts Blue Cypress Lake among his favorite locations to enjoy his hobby of nature photography. To him, the 2 1/2 hour drive is well worth it to see the ospreys this time of year.

“I like it most when the ospreys are nesting,” said Cohen, who has been visiting the lake for 10 years. “But the lake is so beautiful, I go there sometimes just to kayak. I plan on going several times a year.”

Jeanne Middleton, of Middleton’s Fish Camp, will arrange guided tours for visitors who would like to photograph the birds and other wildlife there.

She said she has met nature lovers from as far away as The Netherlands, Japan, Canada, New Zealand and Great Britain.

“(Late husband) Joe and I used to take the birds for granted for so many years when the fishing was good out here,” Middleton said. “But it was always Joe’s dream that when fishing slowed down, he could take people out to see the birds. It’s become so popular now, we are already booking reservations for next year.”

## **RESPECT THE BIRD**

Middleton, Cohen and the PIAS volunteers all echoed the same concern for the ospreys currently residing at Blue Cypress Lake: Give them space.

“May is probably a prime month because babies are larger than tiny chicks,” Cohen said. “But the birds are being harassed by every boat that comes by.”

Cohen said to not spend too much time with a bird.

“If I see a bird that I think is on little chicks or eggs, I’ll go right by it,” he said. “I’m afraid those birds will go find another lake to nest next season.”

Bob Montanaro spent three years as a volunteer with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service observing a pair of nesting ospreys at Pelican Island Wildlife Refuge on the Indian River Lagoon. He said the ospreys select a specific tree — one with an open top so they can easily leave and return to their nest.

“They are not agile flyers so they like a nest they can get in and out of from any direction,” Montanaro said.

He said nesting activity usually begins not long after the nonresident birds return to the area in November or December, but the fledglings might not leave the nests until July.

And for at least one male osprey, that means a long season of good fishing and plenty of showing off.

## **OSPREY NEED-TO-KNOW**

**Size:** About 24 inches tall and can have a wing span of nearly 6 feet

**Description:** White head, white breast, brown and white feathers on wings and tail, black stripe through eye

**Range:** Throughout the world's coastal and marsh areas

**Diet:** Fish, 4-12 inches long, with local flavor — catfish, bluegill and shad in freshwater; mullet, trout or pompano (yes, pompano) on Indian River Lagoon

**Nesting:** Top of large trees, sometimes dead, with open canopy, or man-made structures like a tower or pole

**Eggs:** Three, sometimes two to four. Creamy white, blotched with brown. Incubation is by both parents but mostly by female, about 38 days

**Young:** First flight at 51-54 days; mated adult pair will have one brood per year

**Tips:** At nesting spots like Blue Cypress Lake, give the birds as wide a berth as possible; disturbing them could disrupt nesting behavior or cause them not to come back next year

**More information:** Go to <http://pelicanislandaudubon.org/> (<http://pelicanislandaudubon.org/>) to learn more about the Pelican Island Audubon Society, local birding tips, programs and projects or to purchase a copy of Richard and Juanita Baker's comprehensive book, "Reflections of Blue Cypress Lake." All proceeds go to the Audubon Society.

**Source:** MyFWC.com (<http://MyFWC.com>) and [www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/osprey](http://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/osprey) (<http://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/osprey>)

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