

NEWS

Ospreys put Blue Cypress Lake on birders' map

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Blue Cypress Lake, an enchanting cypress-studded habitat for osprey 26 miles west of Vero Beach, is about to be designated an "Important Birding Area," which will put it on the map of professional birders.

Its claim to fame: The densest population of osprey in the world.

The prestigious IBA classification is expected to come after Pelican Island Audubon Society leaders Richard Baker and Bob Bruce complete an official osprey count for the national Audubon Society and BirdLife International.



Baker and Bruce give regular guided boat tours on the lake when the osprey are in residence between late fall and late spring, and Baker, a Ph.D. naturalist with wife Juanita, has written a book, full of gorgeous photographs, about the wonders and history of the lake.

Because its banks are covered with cypress trees that extend into the lake and because it and the Stick Marsh next to it are filled with small fish, the lake is perfect for the osprey, a dark brown and white fish hawk with a six-foot wing span that nests on the lake.

Anyone who takes the Pelican Island Audubon Society boat tour will be treated to an idyllic three-hour get-away on the lake at sunset or sunrise, seeing osprey in all facets of their existence – from nesting to hunting to reproducing.

Despite the activity, tour guests always disembark from the pontoon boat at the end of the tour feeling blessedly serene.

To complete the count, Baker and Bruce will use small nails to fix numbers to the cypress trees that have active nests in them. They have between 300 and 400 numbers in anticipation.

Over 300 nests add up to at least 700 osprey – 300 males and 300 females plus one to three baby birds per nest – on a lake that's about 6,500 acres.

Florida biologist Mike McMillian has been monitoring and counting osprey for over 25 years and says the two densest areas in the world are Lake

Istokpoga in Highlands County and Blue Cypress Lake.

"They've gone back and forth for years for the title, but now Blue Cypress, which is a smaller lake, has surpassed Istokpoga," said McMillian. Cypress-studded Istokpoga Lake is more than four times larger.

In 2004, Blue Cypress had 332 nests, said McMillian. "More than Istokpoga has ever had."

And now, says the biologist, Blue Cypress has "probably the highest in the world," he said.

McMillian's hypothesis to explain why these two lakes are so attractive to osprey is this: Istokpoga has the aquatic hydrilla plant in it, which makes it a great minnow nursery habitat for crappie, bass and catfish to feed on, as does the Stick Marsh, which runs along the southwest edge of Blue Cypress Lake.

To show the feasibility of his hypothesis, McMillian said that Lake Auburndale in Polk County had 75 osprey nests a few years ago, until they got rid of the hydrilla in the water.

"Now, the osprey nest numbers are down in the teens," he said.

When beautiful Blue Cypress Lake becomes an Important Birding Area it will be one of 12,000 IBAs in the world and one of 2,600 in the U.S. ■