



[St. Louis District Home](#)

[Public Affairs Home](#)

Empty Nest? Hopefully not for long!

by Mindy Cory, PA Staff

Two new osprey nesting structures at the US Army Corps of Engineers St. Louis District's Rivers Project Office at West Alton, Mo., might be inhabited in as little as a month after their installation. The basket-like platforms sitting atop utility poles are designed to serve as habitat for ospreys, a bird of prey that normally begins nesting in late February.

Ospreys normally nest in large trees that are completely surrounded by water, giving them a 360° view of potential predators. Because availability of this type of habitat is limited, ospreys are opportunistic and readily build nests on man-made platforms.

The idea of placing the structures was brought about by volunteer Gene Sands who spends a good deal of time observing the wildlife at the Riverlands Migratory Bird Sanctuary. Sands, a retired biologist, contacted the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to inquire about having a platform donated.

"I only asked for one platform and they (IDNR) insisted I take two" said Sands who went with Corps biologist Charlie Deutsch to retrieve the donated items.

Corps biologist Sarah Miller confirmed that ospreys had been in the Riverlands Migratory Bird Sanctuary as recently as a few weeks before installation. Miller used the success of similar structures at the Corps' Carlyle Lake as a guide to determine the best locations for the new habitat.

Three nesting platforms are already in place at Carlyle Lake, approximately 50 miles southeast of the Alton area. The first structure was installed at the lake in 2003 and was occupied immediately. It continues to remain active. The success of this shoreline platform aided in Miller deciding on two waterside locations, one on Ellis Island and the other just behind the Rivers Project Office.

Miller worked with Ameren, a St. Louis based utility company, to arrange the donation of two utility poles along with a crew of four to install the structures. Installation was completed on January 22, 2009.

While the main goal is to increase nesting habitat and encourage a balanced ecosystem, the platforms' locations have other benefits as well.

"Visitors can see both sites from our conference room with a spotting scope or binoculars. If we end up with any



AmerenUE technicians install one of two nesting structures intended for Ospreys at the St. Louis District's Rivers Project Office.



Corps biologist Sarah Miller discusses the project with Gene Sands, a retired biologist who regularly attends events at the Riverlands Migratory Bird Sanctuary in West Alton, Mo.

active nests, they would make excellent environmental education tools," says Miller.

The platforms are an integral part of re-establishing osprey populations in many areas. Ospreys, like other birds of prey, were heavily impacted by the use of the pesticide DDT which caused drastic declines in population. The osprey remains endangered in several states, including neighboring Illinois, but not in Missouri, where the Riverlands Migratory Bird Sanctuary is located.

An osprey is a fairly large bird of prey with a white underside, black back and wings, and a dark stripe across its white face. They are often identified in flight by the bends in their 5-foot wingspans which give them a slightly "M" shaped silhouette.

A typical osprey clutch is up to 4 eggs. They do not all hatch at the same time; often 5 days will pass between the first and last hatching. Because a young raptor's size increases rapidly, the oldest chick often dominates its siblings and will monopolize a scarce food supply.

Ospreys are known for the spectacular displays they put on while hunting for fish, the main staple of their diet. The birds will often hover over the water's surface until conditions are exactly right. Then they dive feet first into the water to grab a fish which is carried head first, in line with the bird's body.

[\[Printable PDF\]](#)
