

Open house for ospreys

The foundation's land stewardship team has launched a habitat-management initiative for ospreys, establishing Big Rock Valley's first nesting platform.

"Ospreys are a species of special concern in Michigan, and appropriate nesting platforms are critical to their recovery," says Jarod Reibel, the foundation's conservation stewardship land manager. "Ospreys often build nests on manmade structures like cellular towers and utility poles," he explains. "This can cause many problems, such as risk of electrocution for the birds, fire hazards and structural issues for humans."

Like any successful real estate project, finding the right location for the nesting platform was key. On the wish list: Proximity to water and a food source for the birds (their primary diet being fish), but limited contact with people as ospreys don't deal well with human disturbances, especially while raising their young. This ruled out a direct placement on Sharkey Lake, which the foundation's employees and guests use for fishing and boating.

Reibel eventually found an open wetland area about 250 yards from the lake that fit the bill. It's close enough for feeding and easy to locate from the air, but remote enough for solitude and the area has nearby snags to serve as additional perches for the raptors.

Considerable thought was also given to the platform's construction. Reibel adapted a design from New Jersey's Division of Fish and Wildlife — one that was strong enough to last for many years and could be taken into the wetland in pieces for easier transport. To make



Above: The osprey nesting platform rises about 13 feet above ground and is located southeast of Sharkey Lake. Right: A species of special concern, the osprey is one of the most unique North American raptors. Similar to eagles, but slightly smaller and slimmer, ospreys are outstanding anglers.



the platform as environmentally safe as possible, untreated red cedar was used for any pieces the birds might have contact with. And though the platform's design was relatively simple, installing it was a team effort: With help from Keith Green, Tim Hartsell, José Ruiz and Jon VanSchoick, Reibel carried the platform's components into its wetland home and completed construction in early March.

Ospreys, which mate for life, typically return to the same nest each

year after overwintering in Central and South America — and juveniles often establish nests near their parents.

"Although we haven't had ospreys take up residency on our platform yet, I've seen them at Sharkey Lake on multiple occasions since we built it," Reibel adds. "We have the right habitat, and I'm opportunistic that a breeding pair will eventually call Big Rock Valley their summer home and raise their young here."