

Out on a limb for an Osprey

by Jim Pence, Mono Basin Tufa State Reserve

“Jim, we have a situation here.” I had just settled into the couch after my first dinner at home after a summer backpacking trip. Ranger Rourke was on the phone from South Tufa, calling to explain the plight of an Osprey fledgling.

If you look closely at some of the off-shore tufa towers around Mono Lake you may see a large pile of sticks that serve as an Osprey nest. As summer progresses, young Osprey stretch their wings and learn how to fly.

Rourke reported that one of South Tufa’s three Osprey fledglings had missed its landing on a nearby tufa tower—the youngster crashed into the tower, clipped its wing, and landed in the water. The bird was partially submerged in the lake and struggling to hang on to the base of the tower while salty, carbonate-rich water stripped valuable oils from its feathers.

It was too late to get a canoe from the Mono Lake Committee, and it was getting dark—something had to be done quickly to assist this bird in need of a boost.

The drive to South Tufa was incredible—the sun had just set and the remaining light in the sky was truly a driving force in my determination to help one of nature’s finest.

Still in my first year living in the Mono Basin, Every day in the Mono Basin is a new experience and this evening was proving itself to be another original. I assembled my gear: gloves, shirt, booties, fins, and rescue tube. Who would have thought this would be my first real swim in this inland ocean? Upon reaching the beach, I saw the struggling bird through a park volunteer’s spotting scope and immediately made the decision to enter the water. As I submerged my head I felt the harsh salts burn the back of my throat.

The swim was about 230 yards, making me glad I had experience as a lifeguard. I reached the tufa tower where the flailing bird was attempting to get a talon into the limestone. By now the sun was long gone and the summer sky was going through its spectrum of colors before darkness. I made my way onto the tufa tower—what an incredible thing! This was my first up close experience with tufa that was actually growing.



230 yards off shore, and in the very last light of the day, Ranger Jim Pence turns for the swim home after placing a stranded Osprey fledgling safely atop its tufa tower perch.

Unlike tufa on the shoreline which shows signs of human disturbance, this tufa is feather-thin and extremely fragile. I balanced myself on a submerged tower and reached for the bird.

The moment of truth had come—I had no idea what to expect. Was this fully-grown bird with a beak and razor sharp talons capable of tearing trout apart, ready for human intervention? Apparently he was. He looked at me as if to say ‘this time I will let you grab me, but there will not be a next time.’ The anti-climatic rescue moment consisted of grabbing the bird across the shoulders and placing him on top of his landing spot. That was easy!

As a ranger working for the State Park one never knows the outcome of a rescue event. But I began my night swim back to the shore with a wonderful feeling of having made contact with nature in a good way.

I know some people would say to let nature take its course. I thought about that. But then I thought about how Osprey nesting on tufa towers at Mono Lake is influenced by humans in the first place. The Osprey made this place home because we humans uncovered good nesting spots. One nesting pair back in the 1980s has become fifteen nests this year! Yes, another success story for the recovering lake.

The swim back to shore was less stressful than the swim out. I switched to backstroke and watched the fading light.

I reached the shore and traveled back home anticipating a warm shower to rinse off the salty lake water. While rinsing my swim trunks I noticed a distinctly oceanic smell. I put my hands into the pockets of my swim shorts, only to find handfuls of brine shrimp I had netted while doing the backstroke.

Sometime during the night or early the next morning the Osprey flew back to the nest, joining his parents and two siblings. It is winter now, and the Osprey are off to warmer locations. I hope my buddy does well down south and comes back to visit and have a family of his own here at Mono Lake. ❖

Jim Pence is coming up on his one-year anniversary as the new Mono Basin Tufa State Reserve Ranger. The State and the Osprey are lucky to have him here!

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