

## PARCO REGIONALE DELLA MAREMMA

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Region: **Tuscany**

Area: **19,800 ha**

Established in: **1975**

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### The Return of the Osprey

Today, this is more than a hope. Started in 2002 in cooperation with Corsica's Regional Park, one of the Mediterranean strongholds of this species, the project for the Osprey nest-building is on its way after the extinction of this species in Italy forty years ago. This project is likely to be one of the most significant initiatives among the conservation interventions in this part of Tuscany and one of the most innovative as far as the Italian protected areas are concerned.

The Osprey is one of the most fascinating birds of our avifauna: it is a migratory bird and spends the winter in many wetlands and coastal areas of the country. Its diet is exclusively based on fish: it captures its preys with spectacular plunges and with its sharp talons.

In Europe, its actual reproduction range has some continuity only in the northern and eastern part of the continent. Small reproduction nuclei survive in Denmark, Germany, France, Hungary and in the Mediterranean basin: Portugal, Balearic Islands, Corsica, Algeria and Morocco. The most important population of northern Mediterranean lives in Corsica, with about 25-28 couples. For this reason, this species is considered rare in Europe. The breeding population is thought to be 8-10,000 couples, but only 100 of them live in the Mediterranean, mostly on coastal rocky areas. The last nesting couple in Italy remained until 1968-69 in the north of Baunei (within Gennargentu National Park) and possibly another couple nested until 1968 on the Island Marettimo in the Egadi Archipelago, in Sicily. The causes of extinction lie in the modification and destruction of the habitats, massive use of pesticides, water pollution, withdrawal of Osprey eggs for commercial or collection purposes, and poaching.

After the agreement between Maremma and Corsica Parks (thanks to the Interreg III Program of the European Regional Development Fund, a twinning among the two was already achieved in 2002, in order to promote exchanges and cooperation), thanks to Legambiente, some Corsican park guards and Roy Tennis, the most famous expert in Osprey reintroduction, spent some time in Maremma in winter 2003-2004, in order to spot suitable sites (among others, the mouth of River Ombrone and the rocky slopes near Talamone) and place artificial nests, perches and silhouettes. After many on-the-spot surveys, on land and on sea, from Talamone to Cala Forno and to Bocca d'Ombrone, five ideal sites for the artificial nests were found.

The Park guards attended specific training courses about the Osprey habits, recognition and biology. Also the Corsican delegation has made optimistic comments regarding the possibility of success of this project, thanks to the ideal conditions of the protected area. In fact, the Osprey has already prolonged its stay within the borders of the Park. Some specimens of *Pandon haliaetus* (this is Osprey's scientific name) have been recently seen, in more than one occasion, by groups of hikers in the sighting booth near Principina, at the mouth of River Ombrone.

There are two main strategies to favor the return of the Osprey. The first, less demanding, is to put silhouettes and artificial nests in adequate sites. In Corsica, this strategy alone brought the breeding couples from 3 to 29. In Uccellina, the artificial silhouettes (two at the moment) in Bocca d'Ombrone and on the rocky slopes near

Talamone, were made of polystyrene and plastic by a park guard at the paltry cost of 3-400 Euros. This strategy proves particularly suitable in the sites where the Osprey usually dwells.

The second strategy is more expensive (50,000 Euros is the total amount, including expenses for Corsican partners and materials) and also more complicated. It is called "locking" and, in Scotland, it raised the breeding couples from one to one hundred in 10-15 years. The third-born is taken away from the nest, without affecting the original number of the population, because it is usually destined to be overcome by the strongest ones (it is the so called "cainism", a widespread phenomenon among birds of prey who thus adapt to the availability of food: if there is plenty, all newborn will survive, on the contrary, if the food lacks, only the first or the second-born will be able to live on). In this case, the chicks are taken from Corsican nests: this operation has already been approved officially by the French Minister of the Environment.

Once taken, the chicks will be transported to Maremma – the first intervention will take place in June 2005, but this operation needs to be repeated at least for two or three years – and put in the artificial nests, where they will be fed on fish for a week (until they begin to fly), carefully avoiding human imprinting. Then, for two or three weeks, the stay of the young Ospreys will be favored by releasing fish in a specifically shielded canal, so that it can be easily caught by the Ospreys.

At this point we can only hope that, thanks to the experience of the first weeks of their lives, the Ospreys will remember Maremma Park. And above all, we hope they will return once they have reached their sexual maturity, in order to lay their eggs in a nest. It would be an amazing return.