



The Osprey Club

Google chats, peach soup and the relentless pursuit to save America's most charismatic raptor.

by Jeff Moore





"To watch is to know."

- Nest watcher Marie Garsjo -

A lone jogger is running down a nameless Montana ranch road as I pull up to nest #302.1 or the “Smith Nest” as some call it.

With venerable Osprey nest watcher Deb Regele next to me in my Bronco, we park almost a half mile away from this platform that’s tightly situated between US Interstate 90, a barn and the Yellowstone River near Reed Point. Dusty binoculars in hand, we were trying to find out on this August morning how many banded Osprey fledglings were still occupying this particular nest.

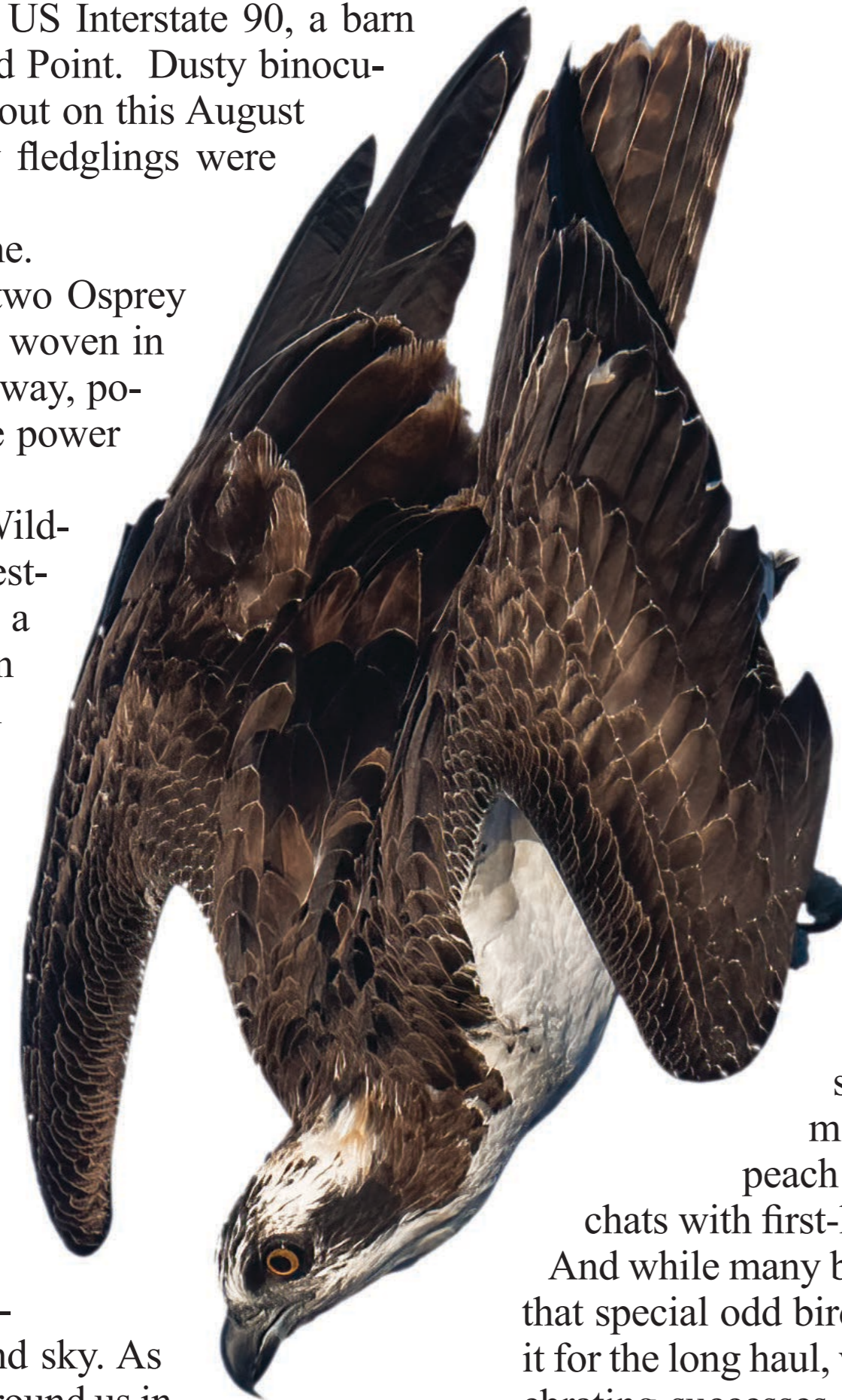
And what a storied nest it had become.

In early May, this exact nest, with two Osprey eggs already on it, was precariously woven in electrical wires that crossed the highway, potentially creating a nightmare for the power company and the birds themselves.

With the permission of US Fish & Wildlife Service and action from Northwestern Energy, this nest was lifted like a delicate pancake and repositioned on the quieter side of the Interstate, on a new power pole, on a more stable platform, away from the chaos.

Now before you freak that this action destroyed all the makings of a new Osprey family, do know the pair returned to the nest that same day. And in what can only be called a showing of avian appreciation, the Ospreys laid a third egg a few days later in their new abode. (There are even more accolades attributed to this nest but that will come later.)

“Five birds”, Deb quietly said, counting the entire family on nest, tree and sky. As American Goldfinches bounced all around us in the nearby prairie bush, our 100-mile excursion to make this season-ending confirmation was complete.



Such are the daily workings of the (YVAS) Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society’s Osprey Nest Monitoring Project. Or as I like to humbly call them The Osprey Club.

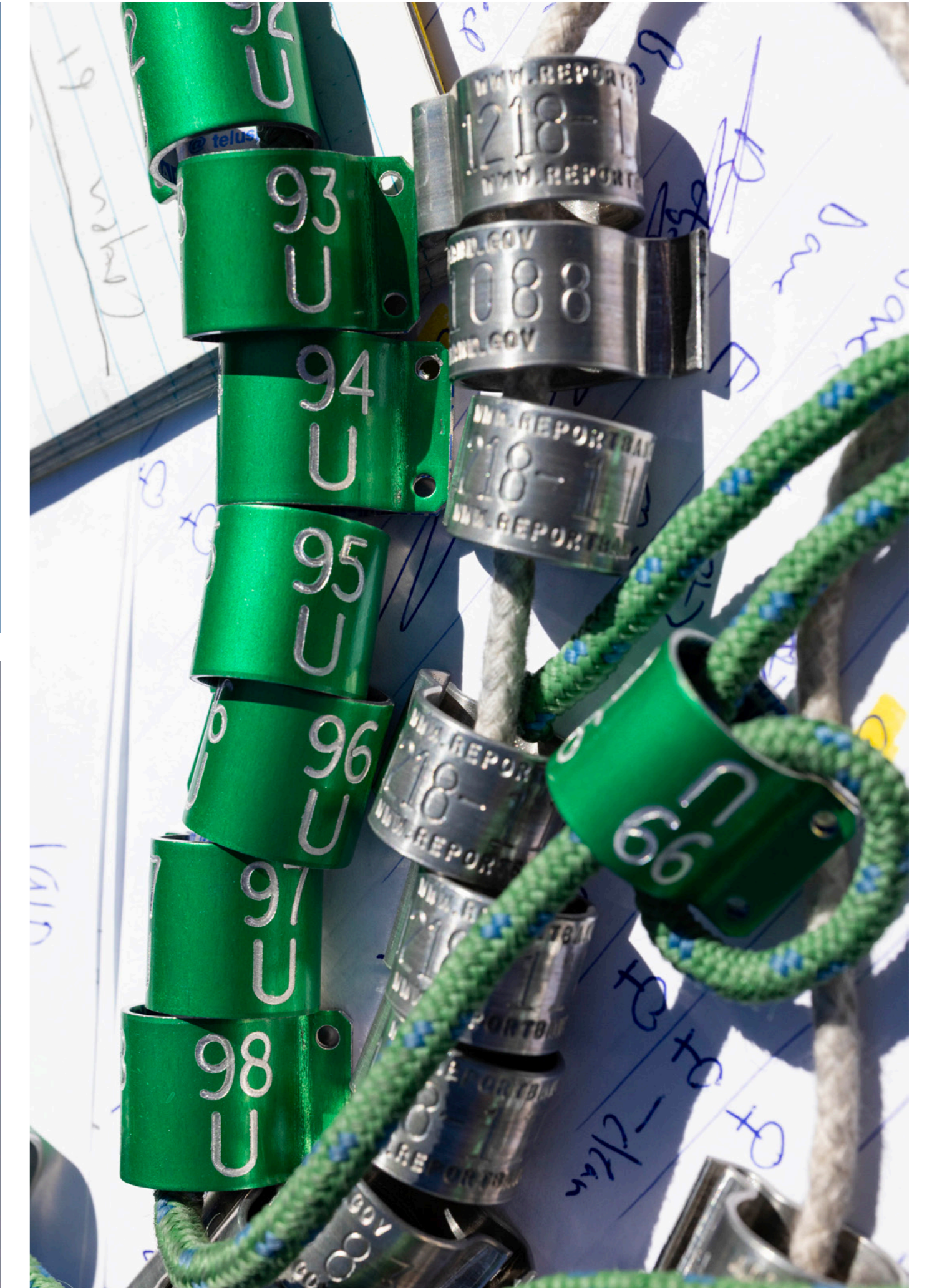
As far as I see it, The Osprey Club seems like a more appropriate name because this is where science meets humanity. Conservation meets conversations. Friendships meet natural history literacy. Picnics with peach soup and pulled pork meet daily Google chats with first-hand behavior reports.

And while many birders celebrate the occasional rare finding, that special odd bird uncovered, this group of Montanans is in it for the long haul, watching the same birds year after year, celebrating successes, addressing failures, following their global travels and recording valuable data for both long term studies and immediate conservation efforts. A bigger bond indeed.

Agree or disagree with the name, The Osprey Club is a modern testament to how volunteers with similar interests can be as diverse, chatty and as effective as possible. And for the Ospreys that breed along a 320-mile stretch of the Yellowstone River from Gardiner to Miles City, it’s making a difference.

So let’s begin with the birds before we start with the people. Right now, Ospreys, those acrobatic, fish-catching raptors, trend upwards in populations. From the devastating DDT 60’s, Ospreys have seen a resounding comeback throughout the US, with about 8,000 breeding pairs nationwide. Males are the master fishers, the breadwinner of sorts for the entire nest. And females, with their larger size and sometimes dark necklace around their chest, show their uncontested devotion to the survival of their brood. A cohesive family on the nest, Ospreys migrate separately.

In Montana, nesting numbers also generally remain steady, with a slight increase. However, the western part of the State doesn’t do as well due to legacy mining minerals in some rivers. Overall, nest success rates are approximately 70%, and 15% make it back to Montana to breed three years later.



Not capricious explorers when it comes to nesting, Ospreys don’t quickly colonize new breeding grounds, preferring to remain in established territories with other Ospreys. And they seem to be quite content returning every year to the healthy and longest undammed river in the US, the Yellowstone. Leg band sightings show adult Yellowstone Ospreys return mostly within 50 miles of where they were hatched.

Still, even where the Osprey does well, heavy challenges hover over the bird that hovers.

Above all, the number one threat is farming baling twine-- that innocuous green or orange woven

string which snares sharpened claws and leads to starvation or prolonged hanging deaths on the very nests that they build. Studies show 5-10% of the offspring die from twine complications. Electrocutation follows second. And with Montana’s 90,000 miles of electrical poles, deaths occur routinely.

To combat those two major concerns, The Osprey Club quietly began in 2009.

An enlightened man from the Montana Department of Agriculture named Monty Sullins simply told the Billings Yellowstone Valley Audubon office “this sounds like a job for birders”

The green bands on the legs of these Ospreys show that they come from the Yellowstone River somewhere between Gardiner and Miles City.

“Our friendships started with Ospreys”

and together rolled out a focused nest monitoring program. 15 volunteers. 40 nests. 5 Power companies.

Now, if there is one bird that's tailor made for such a stronghold of human help, it's the Osprey. And the humans in this case, whether birders or electrical company execs, began seeing how organized viewing helped increase populations, while reducing outages and equipment damage.

But then three years later, in 2012, an even stronger force came to help.

Loaded with a heavy strap of raptor credentials, a calm, resolute man named Marco Restani simply came to the Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society one day to give a lecture. Dr. Restani, both a seasoned academic and field scientist, was immediately interested in the burgeoning efforts. His later position as head of the Avian Protection Program and Wildlife Biologist for Northwestern Electric in Red Lodge, already focused on

reducing bird/powerline conflicts, didn't hurt either. More important, Restani strengthened ties with the US Bird Banding Lab to quickly solidify the leg banding component of the club. “Birders and our power companies are strange bedfellows,” says Restani. “But the goal for bird protection is the same. And so for me, the biggest benefit of the group is bringing together two entities that you wouldn't necessarily think would collaborate or cooperate on a project.”

And with that, the Club's resounding purpose steadily grew, to 40 nest watchers and 100 nests.

In 2022, the club collected 36,000 lbs. of baling twine, forever eliminating it from the Yellowstone landscape. Numerous nests were moved from compromised locations to prevent fires and outages. The club's data started appearing in many long-term studies and publications, most notably Tim Mackrill's definitive book *The Osprey*. And new discoveries appeared as more of their green numbered leg bands (the color proof Ospreys originate from the Yellowstone River) were spotted from the Gulf Coast all the way to Costa

Rica. (My favorite story came when a Louisiana shipyard security guard in his windowless office used his robotic cameras to zoom into and read the band numbers of a Yellowstone Osprey that was sitting on a power pole.)

Of course, unlike that sitting Louisianan, being a Montana nest watcher is somewhat a test of endurance. From April to September, volunteers drive up to 1500 miles back and forth watching their nests. Two or three nests for some. Up to nine for others. A handful of riverside members have nests in their own backyards, witnessing the daily behavior from their work desks or patio tables. One nest watcher's home construction crew even designed two new windows into the walls closest



📷 Farming baling twine hangs from a Montana nest. Ospreys are attracted to it as nesting material and bring it their nest, creating a death trap for both nestlings and adults.

to the Osprey nest just so their owners would have a better view.

Everyone's observance focuses around the welfare of the birds plus two key dates which relate to a precise window when the fledglings can be banded—big enough for an adult leg band and flightless enough so they don't try to escape from the platform.

Dry, numeric data goes to long term population studies. First hand observations go into better understanding this rather obvious raptor.

Amazingly, as the impact of the Osprey Club widened, the bond between members strengthened.

On a warm June day, Joan Cayan, Connie Dotzenrod and Norma Nickerson hit the Passage Falls Trail located in Mill Creek in the Custer-Gallatin National Forest. Their first hike together included mountain wildflowers, fishermen after Cutthroat trout and eventually the Falls themselves. Far away from the bird nests, they just talked and enjoyed the Montana they've grown to love.

“Our friendships started with Ospreys”, says Cayan whose river nest No. 154 sits in view of their second-floor porch at river's bend. “And you can become really quick friends because of the common interests.”

Conservation meets conversation at two end-of-season picnics for the club. Homemade foods, soups and personal stories create a special bond between members.

For all, such simpatico is fueled daily by amazing, shared stories which go beyond most scientific manuals.

Scott Montgomery, a retired computer teacher, witnessed the most notable display last summer. Scott, who monitors two nests a half mile apart near Laurel, noticed that the banded 00/M male was trading back and forth between the nests, feeding two females and fighting off all intruders from both locations. "I think we have a real swinger here," Montgomery wrote. A rare "swinger" indeed.

"They're just part of our lives."

Ross and Norma Nickerson of Paradise Valley delight in announcing the first arriving Osprey of Spring -- a friendly competition across Google chat members. Their male has arrived to their nest exactly between March 28-30, for 4 straight years. Sue Weinreis can't claim such proud accolades. For

the past 2 years, her Ospreys on nest # 388 in Laurel have been of the non-compatible type---constantly disagreeing, with the female "never stop yapping" at her mate. Needless to say, that pair never had a successful nest to date.

Hands down, the most successful nest of the group comes from the strangest of places---The Billings Motorcycle Club Race Track. Despite the weekly roar of summer races encircling their elevated nest platform, the couple has produced no less than 25 offspring in 9 years.

Email after email, the individualistic characteristics of these raptors can't be ignored. Despite the scientific focus, some watchers are only human and pepper their correspondences with nicknames such as "Baby Huey", an oversized, over-eating female with a certain joie de vie. Or "Mr. Eligible" for a male who attracted no less than four courting females circling his nest. Not scientific Latin names by all means, but they keep the conversations flowing.

"They're just part of our lives, says Tim Cayen who's been a nest watcher for 6 years now. "It's nice to be contributing to a bigger program, a bigger understanding."

Such are the joys of long-term bird watching.

"It ain't Disney out there."

Heartbreaking encounters are the flip side. As leader Restani often affirms "It ain't Disney out there".

In June, while Tom and Connie Dotzenrod's home got hammered by a fierce Montana hailstorm, causing thousands of dollars of damage, they painfully witnessed their nesting female tough it out for almost half an hour. Even worse, Ginny Waples' Ospreys lost a nestling to a storm last year, having to watch its mother mournfully gaze at its corpse for days. Car collisions happen. Eagle and owl predation is witnessed. And twine entanglements are hopefully quickly intervened. Nest failures, for whatever reason, are often shared as supreme disappointments.

Still, connections go even farther.

This year, the volunteers have already cheered emails from sightings down the hemisphere. Recorded on Nov 8, 2025, juvenile 77/U from Emigrant travelled 1510 miles in just under two months to Laguna Atascosa NWR, TX. Another bird, 34/U, banded on 7/3/25 on Billings nest 410.1 ("Hello Carolyn") was seen in San Angelo. With new locations, come new friends. One Texas photographer who documented bird 10/B in Galveston over successive winters travelled to Catherine Frazer's place in Absarokee just to get a picture of the same bird on its nest.

As the summer season wanes and watchers hope to see the pinnacle of nest viewing-- initial flights off the platform-- the club's final picnics bring members face to face. This year, there were two, dictated by the expansive region. Tables filled with home-baked pies, cold soups, barbeque, iced beer

and rooms filled with laughter and new pictures of grandkids make the day. And with this year's resounding success on the Yellowstone (94 new bandings), the mood was even more satisfying.

"This is one of the last things I'd have to give up...if I had to give up something," declared Sue Weinreis about her involvement. With paper plate in hand, she adds, "The end is always sad, but with all the work, it's a bit of relief too."

Of course, the Montana winter will always arrive. The Ospreys, long gone. Their platforms, tall, lonely and cold. That's when the family of nest watchers goes dormant too, but just for a moment-- until another Google post rings in, revealing yet another banded Yellowstone bird spotted in Texas or even Puerto Rico, the farthest distance ever recorded by the group. That's when the excitement begins to glow all over again.

And with that, we return to Nest 302.1, the one that began this story.

On July 17th, Marco Restani raised himself up in the Northwestern Energy bucket lift for one of the

last times this season. He pulled the legs out from under the third motionless nestling and crimped green band No. 07/V on its right leg. Marco knew this was the 1000th bird the Osprey Cub had banded on the Yellowstone since 2012 and quickly took out a spiral pocket notebook. He scribbled "#1000" and placed the page on the nest next to the birds. He took a picture, then quickly sent it across the network when he got down. For the Osprey Club, great news always flies fast.



This is the picture Marco Restani took just after banding the club's thousandth Osprey on nest 302.1 near Reed Point, Mt.



Jeff Moore is a Montana outdoor writer/photographer who documents all things Montana. His birdy website is jeffmooreimages.net.