

# Survey of Breeding Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* in Abu Dhabi Emirate

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Ospreys on the nest in western Abu Dhabi (Picture: Salim Javed)

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, a resident breeding bird in the UAE, is a regional priority species in the Middle East. During the 2006-2007 breeding season, extensive surveys were conducted at key islands and coastal sites in Abu Dhabi emirate to determine its breeding status and to compare changes in numbers from previous surveys. The latest survey, carried out by the Terrestrial Environment Research Centre of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD), is part of the Agency's programme to monitor wild birds and assess the status of important breeding bird species in the Emirate.

In the Arabian Peninsula, Osprey is a common breeding species in the Red Sea, the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. In the Arabian Gulf, important breeding populations are found in Bahrain, the western islands of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Musandam (Oman) (Jennings, 1995).

Surveys were conducted on islands and along the mainland coast from west of Abu Dhabi to Ra's Ghumais, near Sila, and also eastwards to Taweelah. Particular effort was made to visit those islands for which no prior information on nesting was available. Unfortunately fresh surveys could not be undertaken of Aryam and

Futaisi islands or of neighbouring localities (especially rocky islets *ēqasasir'*), an area known to have supported an additional 10-12 breeding pairs in recent years (Aspinall & Hellyer, *pers. comm.*) and thought still to do so at the present time.

Altogether 138 adult birds were seen during the survey period and a total of 117 nests were recorded, of which 61 were active and the rest either inactive or attended by non-breeding birds (Khan *et al.*, 2007). Out of the 61 active nest sites, 75% were on islands, with 25% being coastal sites.

Overall, it is estimated that approximately 71-73 breeding pairs are present in the emirate of Abu Dhabi at the present time, this being the entire UAE population (no nesting pairs are currently known in any other emirate or were known at the time of earlier survey).

The 2007 survey was more complete than that of 1993 (Aspinall, 1994), with many additional sites having been visited, and it is thus not possible to assess any change in the species' UAE population, even though the total of 70+ pairs estimated in 1994 is close to that found in 2007.



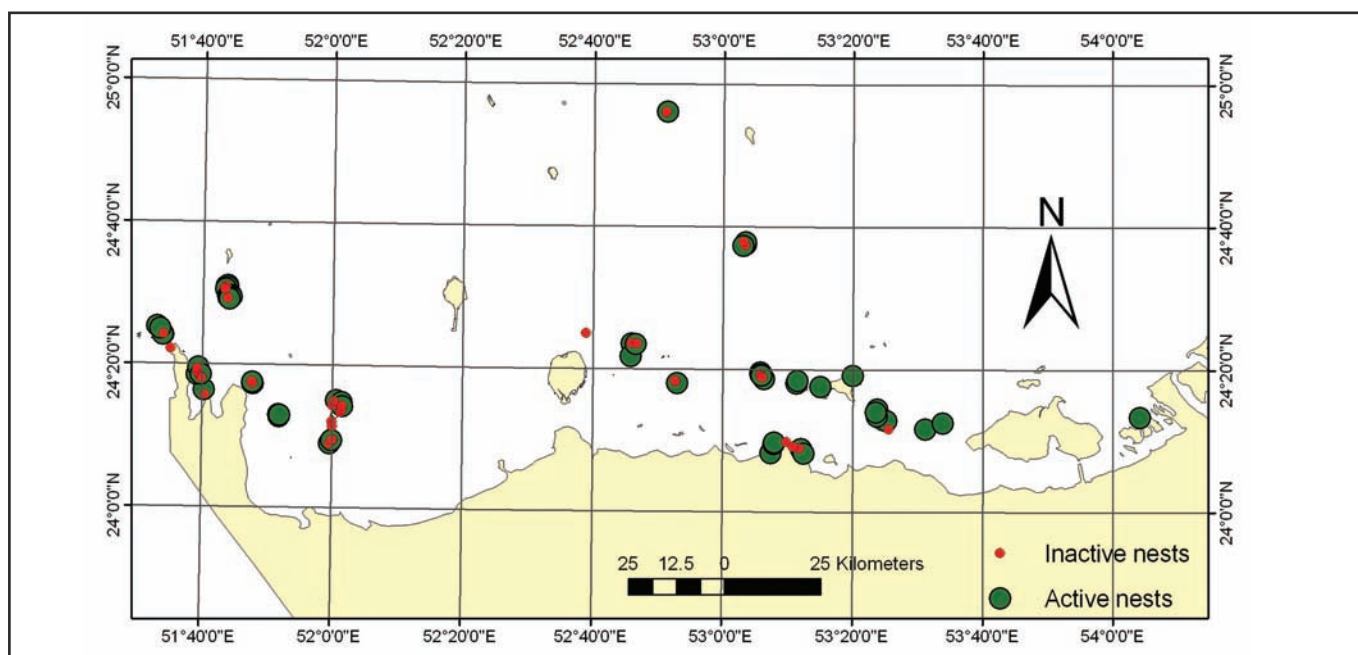
Young ospreys near Bu Tini (Picture: Salim Javed)

Despite this, it is apparent, for example, that nearly 80% of the active nests have been lost from some former island strongholds during the last decade. On the Yasat archipelago only four nests were active in 2007, some 29 pairs having been present in 1994 (*Table 1*). Nonetheless the Al Yasat group remains of considerable importance for the species. The largest number of active nests (nine) in 2007 came from Muhayyimat.

Disturbance at the nest may cause pairs to abort breeding attempts, particularly during the early stages of nesting. In 2007, nearly 40% of nests on islands were inactive, in some instances this certainly being due to abandonment of the site as a result of development activities and disturbance from continuous human

presence. North Yasat has been developed extensively and presumably disturbance from such development and human presence has resulted in nearly 50% decline in the number of total nests on the island. In 1993 about 77% of nests were active (Aspinall, 1994), while in 2007 only 18% were active or attended; a decline of nearly 88% from 1994 to 2007. South Yasat has also undergone marked changes in the habitat due to development and disturbance. This has resulted in a 70% decrease in the number of nests on the island.

In 1993, 90% of nests recorded were active while only one of the three nests recorded was occupied by a breeding pair in 2007.



Distribution of osprey nests in Western Abu Dhabi - 2007

The UAE's Osprey population remains of international importance, representing the bulk of the Arabian Gulf breeding population, perhaps over 75% at the present time and also estimated to be some 20% of the non-breeding population of the Middle East. The western islands of Abu Dhabi support the majority of the Gulf's breeding Ospreys and every effort must thus be made to protect key sites and keep them free from any form of disturbance. Muhayyimat, Gerain Al Aish, Al Bazm al-Gharbi, Umm Amim, Ghaghah, Bu Tinah, Faza'iyya, (Al Ufzai'yya). Umm Al Hatab and Al Yasat are those sites of particular importance. Some of these sites are already protected; however, protection of the Muhayyimat island complex and of Umm Al Hatab as well as keeping disturbance to a minimum at other sites are urgent priorities. Ospreys readily use man-made nest platforms at many of the sites. Nearly 26% of all the 117 nests recorded were on nesting platforms, these having been installed by owners to encourage nesting, and are a valuable conservation tool in facilitating successful breeding, helping expansion (including to other emirates), recolonisation or simply maintenance of breeding populations.

Recommendations to protect key sites have already been made for a number of species of breeding seabird (Javed & Khan, 2003), many of these also being significant for nesting Ospreys, and it is thus critical that these are formally designated.

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Site	Nests	
	1994	2007
North Yasat	22 (17)*	11 (2)
South Yasat	10 (9)	3 (1)
Yasat Saghirah	1 (1)	4 (1)
Judairah	2 (2)	2 (1)
Ghaghah	21 (16)	7 (4)

Table 1. Comparison of number of nests recorded in 1993 (Aspinall 1994) and the 2007 survey.  
(\*Figures in parentheses are active nests)