Ospreys are intense birds in appearance. The 2-foot long animals are cornucopias of brown feathers with white underbellies textured like cotton. They seem to be wearing quiff haircuts, which is a prominent forelock of hair. Between their hooked talons and yellow stoplight eyes, they project haughtiness and power.

The face of an osprey appears perpetually angry. When one first encounters an osprey, it’s the condescending exterior that makes it difficult to believe that its call can really sound like that—a squeaking chirp calling out across the power lines.

Ospreys are one of the most geographically widespread of all bird species in the world. Indiscriminate of region, they nest near water. Whether you’re in Alaska or Africa, you’re likely to meet one. They inhabit both saltwater and freshwater areas, and they are excellent anglers whose diets consist almost exclusively of fish. Their eyes are able to calculate water refraction so that their aim is accurate, and the unique curve of their talons is advantageous when gripping slippery fish.

It is fitting that ospreys would be so finely tuned to their environments. They’ve had 3 million years of evolution to perfect their assets. Some scientists believe that ospreys have been around for even longer, claiming that they have inhabited the planet for 10 to 15 million years. When it comes to nesting, ospreys have definite preferences. An osprey’s first choice is a dead tree upon which it may perch at a decent height. As fishers, ospreys have a more vertical flight path than other birds, so when they come in to land, they hover over their target and drop down. While their trajectory works to their benefit when searching for dinner, it makes it difficult for ospreys to fly into areas of heavy foliage. Instead, they prefer open spaces and naked structures. A dead tree is an ideal home for a family of ospreys.

When a tree is unavailable or unappealing, ospreys will get creative. This is where Santee Cooper’s friendship with the birds began.

Santee Cooper power lines and communication towers have long been housing ospreys. As Brad Sale, park director at Old Santee Canal Park explained, “The power lines actually make really good nesting sites for ospreys, just because they like to be out in the open. Most of these power lines are out in clearings. They’re close to water.”
Ospreys fly with a steady, rowing flight motion unlike most members of the hawk family. They are not very maneuverable so they require wide-open spaces.

A Fine Feathered Friendship

The True Story of the Unlikely Relationship Between Ospreys and Santee Cooper
elaborated that ospreys love having a 360-degree view in order to be able to see everything that approaches. For the most part, birds prefer to remain hidden in foliage, but as strong territorial birds of prey, ospreys are an exception. Santee Cooper structures make perfect homes for them.

Sale has been with Old Santee Canal Park for 11 years and has degrees in marine science and biology, with a master’s in education. He said that Moncks Corner is ideal for ospreys. A multitude of the birds can be found around the Tailrace Canal and Lake Moultrie. Sale understands why ospreys nest on Santee Cooper poles and elaborated on the protocol for the common scenario in which that happens.

“For the most part, osprey nests do not bother the power lines as far as disrupting service,” Sale said. “In the rare occasion that they do, Santee Cooper has a great working relationship with the Center for Birds of Prey in Awendaw, South Carolina, north of Charleston. We’ll call them occasionally for advice or suggestions on what to do about ospreys.”

The Center for Birds of Prey is part of the Avian Conservation Center founded in 2004. Although Santee Cooper has an obligation to the ospreys, there is also a responsibility to customers who depend on Santee Cooper power. When particularly rambunctious osprey families have caused disruptions in the past, it’s the Center for Birds of Prey that has come to the rescue.

Avian Conservation Center founder Jim Elliott explained the process of safely relocating them.

“They are a species that will respond to an artificial nest platform, which is not something all birds do. That creates an opportunity when a nest is in an unfortunate place. We can offer them a man-made alternative that they might accept,” Elliott said, recalling the center’s past work with Santee Cooper.

The process isn’t always easy, but the birds’ safety is always a priority. Ospreys have what is referred to as “nest fidelity,” meaning they are tethered to one location. Their instinct to stay in one place can lengthen the relocation process.

If power disruptions occur, an inactive nest will be relocated so that the birds are encouraged to move when they return. This is the preferred course of action because it does not force the birds to rebuild. Active nests pose more of a challenge, and the Avian Conservation Center
This injured osprey is receiving skilled care at the Center for Birds of Prey. Also known as the fish hawk or fish eagle, this raptor with keen eyesight is well adapted to angling. Their nostrils can be closed during dives and they feature an outer toe that can be angled backwards to better grasp fish.

and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service handle the ospreys by providing advice to Santee Cooper. A perceptive eye may notice Santee Cooper platforms already hosting ospreys around Moncks Corner. Those nests are likely ones that have been relocated in the past due to power disruptions.

A prime example of nest protection during standard operations is provided by Jefferies Hydroelectric Station near Moncks Corner. Demolition of the old, coal-fired generating station site wrapped over the summer, except for one tower. Before the structure was scheduled to come down, feathered opportunists set up shop on the skeletal metal construction. It wasn’t until the ospreys hatched their eggs and left that the nest could be moved and the tower could come down.

Brian Holmes, director of Santee Cooper’s environmental management systems, explained why Santee Cooper takes extra steps to protect osprey nests, even when law doesn’t require it.

“We’re happy to have them,” he said. “The regulations and laws around avian protection are very strict, so we want to make sure we’re doing the right thing to stay in compliance. That’s a starting point, but we want to go beyond that and encourage protections.”

“Birds have just as much right to survive and thrive on this planet as we do,” added Santee Cooper Environmental Specialist III William Brown. To Brown, a day on the water would not be complete without the call of an osprey. While the sentimental and aesthetic values of
National Geographic has declared 2018 the Year of the Bird.
the birds are precious, Brown is resolute that the environmental importance of ospreys is not to be ignored. Elliott agreed. They are vital to the health of their ecosystems.

“They reflect the health of that marine environment because they almost eat exclusively fish. The health of ospreys is a direct reflection of the health of that coastal ecosystem,” Elliott explained. However, the birds are also valuable from an evolutionary standpoint.

Said Elliott, “There’s an interesting discussion about treating injured birds and is it worthwhile treating one or two or three ospreys, you know? You’re not saving a species. Should you invest more of your money into treating populations and looking at global migration? But we don’t know what that bird you saw today is carrying in terms of that evolution. Genetically, if you take that bird out, you don’t know what all you’re losing.”

Elliott believes that every osprey is valuable because it is the product of over 3 million years of evolutionary genetics. Ospreys are being continually perfected.

Santee Cooper’s relationship with ospreys is a protective, symbiotic one and people like Sale, Elliott, Holmes and Brown are working to keep it that way. Ospreys were here long before Santee Cooper and through environmental efforts and conservationism, they’re here to stay.

National Geographic has declared 2018 as the Year of the Bird in order to celebrate the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Ongoing educational efforts aim to inform citizens about the importance of birds and all the services they provide to their ecosystems.

“It’s a great year to educate the public about birds, to learn about birds, to go out and see birds,” Sale said. “We encourage people to come out here to the park and see all of the birds that we have here to offer, especially the ospreys.”

Osprey numbers began declining in the 1950s through the 1970s because pesticides often poisoned the birds and thinned their eggshells, making reproduction difficult. With increased pesticide regulation, the population is steadily growing.

Additionally, ospreys mate for life, increasing chances to successfully reproduce and have their offspring reach maturity, and they adapt readily to artificial nesting platforms like this one provided by Santee Cooper.