

## A seahawk by any other name would be ... an osprey?



Tribune/Kyle Mills

An osprey, a fish-eating hawk that is likely the inspiration behind the Seattle Seahawks nickname, takes a break from devouring a recently caught trout.

### **Eric Barker/Lewiston Tribune**

With all the Super Bowl hype of late, plus the regional enthusiasm for Seattle's football team, perhaps you've wondered, "What exactly is a seahawk?"

There is no easy answer other than there is no bird that goes by that name. If you consult the all-knowing Internet, you'll find most people who have weighed in on the matter assume Seattle's mascot is actually an osprey - a bird of prey that lives near the water and hunts fish. Wikipedia lists several aliases for osprey, including "fish eagle, sea hawk, river hawk or fish hawk."

I asked three raptor experts to offer their opinion. They all said a seahawk is likely either an osprey or an eagle. Joel Sauder, the non-game biologist for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game at Lewiston, agreed osprey is as good a guess as anything.

"That would be the most likely interpretation of a seahawk," he said.

But Sauder, along with retired Fish and Game biologist Wayne Melquist and Rob Bierregaard Jr., an osprey expert who works for the Academy of Natural Sciences at Philadelphia, all noted the beak of the bird portrayed by the Seahawks logo more closely resembles that of an eagle than an osprey.

But an eagle isn't a hawk, so I'm sticking with osprey. But then an osprey isn't necessarily a hawk. Osprey belong to their own family, pandionidae, which, depending on who you ask, is listed under the order that both eagles and hawks belong to, or to the order that falcons belong to. Confused?

Perhaps the answer can be found by looking at Taima, the Seahawks living mascot that flies onto the field at home games. Sorry. That bird is an auger hawk native to Africa and thus not likely the source of inspiration when Seattle chose to name its football team.

Taima's handler, David Knutson, a Spokane-based falconer, said when he first was approached by Seahawks brass about using a live bird during pregame ceremonies, he tried to find an osprey from a raptor rescue organization. But he wasn't able to get approval from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which forbids the use of native birds for commercial purposes.

"They are not even legal for us as falconers to obtain. They are not under our list of birds we can use for falconry," he said.

Since osprey hunt and kill fish, compared to eagles that sometimes hunt but also frequently scavenge the carcasses of anything dead, including fish, osprey seem like a more appropriate mascot. So again, I'm leaning toward a seahawk being an osprey.

It's a good choice for a mascot, said Sauder, a fan of the Seahawks.

"They are good predators," he said. "They are excellent fliers with keen vision."

Melquist described their hunting prowess as impressive. When osprey, which are common to most places on the planet, spot a fish near the surface, they plunge into the water with their talons stretched out in front of them much like an Olympic diver, and grab it.

"They will go down a foot or more sometimes in the water and catch fish," he said.

Bierregaard, who has studied osprey at Martha's Vineyard in the heart of New England, said they can dive as deep as a yard.

He said they have long wing spans that help them soar above water.

"They are not like most hawks that nest in trees," he said. "Osprey have about a 5-foot wingspan."

That means they are not great at negotiating through trees like goshawks, which love timber. Instead, they seek out solitary trees near water, which makes it easier for them to land.

"They like a room with a view," he said. "What they really want is to come into the nest in the wind from any direction."

Since they are found on every continent other than Antarctica, they nest out in the open and are tolerant of human beings and their dwellings, Bierregaard said, and most people are familiar with the birds.

"Almost anyone who lives near water knows what osprey are," he said.

They are plentiful in Idaho and Washington.

"We have them all over the place," Sauder said. "If people want to see them, in the summer they are up and down the Clearwater River, and there is a lot of them on Dworshak Reservoir."

That being said, there are not many around here now. Osprey migrate to warmer climates during the winter. Melquist, who lives near St. Maries, said they will begin showing up in Idaho in March.

Osprey, like many birds of prey, were in serious trouble as recently as the 1970s. The widespread use of the insecticide DDT led them to produce eggs with thin shells. Since the chemical was banned, osprey have made a remarkable comeback.

"There are probably more now than there were before DDT," Bierregaard said.

So whether you admire the Seahawks, or like me are indifferent to them, I hope you can at least admire the bird that inspired the nickname. Assuming, of course, a seahawk is an osprey.

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