

TWO INSTANCES OF OSPREY CAPTURING A MEADOW VOLE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Throughout its world range, the diet of Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) is considered to consist almost exclusively of live fish. Anecdotal reports of non-fish prey taken opportunistically include at least 20 species of birds, turtles (*Chrysemys* spp.), snakes, voles (*Microtus* spp.), squirrels (*Sciurus* spp.), ground squirrels (*Spermophilus* spp.), Muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*), salamanders, frogs, crustaceans, conchs, and a small American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) (Postupalski and Kleiman 1965, Wiley and Loher 1973, Poole et al. 2002).

In British Columbia, Hosford (1974) observed an Osprey return to its nest with a dead Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*) that appeared scavenged as rigor mortis was already well established. We are not aware of other published reports of incidental prey in the province.

On 2 July 1997, the senior author (RWC) was checking activity of Osprey nests along Reclamation Road in the Creston valley. The immediate area is open farmland with fields interspersed with narrow irrigation ditches. The Kootenay River is nearby. RWC noticed something swimming across a 2.5 m ditch. The animal was brown, about six inches (15 cm) long, with tiny eyes, and appeared to have no tail. It was identified as a vole. While watching the event, an Osprey suddenly swooped down, grabbed the vole from the middle of the ditch, and in a single swoop flew back to its nest about 200 m away. The bird held its prey for a short time then proceeded to eat it.

The vole was almost certainly a Meadow Vole (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*) (Figure 1) which is the most common and widespread species inhabiting farm fields and riparian habitats in the valley (see Van Damme 2005).

Most fish captured by Ospreys generally weigh

between 150 and 300 g (Poole et al. 2002), far above the average weight of 35 g for a Meadow Vole (Nagorsen 2005).



Figure 1. The Meadow Vole is the most common and widespread small rodent in agricultural lands in the Creston valley, BC. 7 March 1999 (Linda M. Van Damme).

On 17 July 2007, at about 2100 hrs, FJEH and his wife Brabara watched an Osprey flying over Salmon Arm Bay on Shuswap Lake at Salmon Arm, British Columbia, just west of the municipal wharf. It circled for about five minutes, making no attempt to catch a fish. The bird then started flying over the lake foreshore, which due to receding water levels, was mostly dried up and covered in grasses of various heights. It then flew to an adjacent field.

The Osprey flew three metres above the ground, behaving much like a Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) when hunting. Then suddenly it dropped to the ground. After a few seconds it took off carrying what appeared to be a brown mouse with a short tail. When last seen the Osprey appeared to be flying

toward one of the nearby nests at the wharf that contained two young.

In over 35 years watching Ospreys on Shuswap Lake, FJEH does recall observing one hunting over dry land along the lake foreshore, let alone catching and carrying a mouse. It is likely the small mammal was a Meadow Vole, which is the most abundant rodent in the area, which favours open grass-sedge habitats associated with lakes and dykes (Nagorsen 2005).

Proctor (1977) reports the only other instance of predation of a Meadow Vole by an Osprey, which he observed being caught and eaten in Connecticut on 3 October 1975.

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