

The east and west branches of the Westport River are part of an estuary where fresh water runs off the surrounding land to meet salt water flowing in and out from the ocean. This creates a highly diverse ecology of birds, land animals, and sea life. The estuary is the final resting place of the watershed that is a hundred-square-mile basin extending northeast from Freetown and Fall River. It is the mission of the Westport River Watershed Alliance to protect the entire watershed from pollution and other threats to its ecology.

There are 19 bird species that inhabit this estuary, and you are guaranteed to see a lot of ospreys nesting on the 60 man-made platforms including males, females, and their chicks. Altogether it is estimated that there are one hundred breeding osprey pairs in the estuary and the surrounding area. The use of the pesticide DDT in the 1960s nearly caused the extinction of ospreys. The population dwindled to 17 breeding pairs in the estuary in the 1970s. The banning of DDT has enabled the osprey population to fully recover.



You are also very likely to see cormorants and egrets on the tour. Cormorants are highly social birds with groups of 20 or more clustering on rocks and shorelines in the estuary. You will see individual tall egrets standing erect as they wade through shallow water in search of prey. Their bright white bodies stand out in stark contrast against the vibrant green marsh grasses.



These three birds are highly adapted to their feeding habits in the estuary. Ospreys soar 50 feet or more above the water searching for fish near the surface. They attack a fish with great speed plunging onto it feet first with sharp claws to secure it. They need to catch about two pounds of fish a day to feed the two or three fast growing chicks. So, you are very likely to see an osprey soaring above the water, diving for a fish making a big splash, and hauling it back to its nest.

In contrast, cormorants dive deep below the surface of the water in search of small fish, insects, or other prey. In the water, cormorants look like snakes with only their necks showing. Unlike other water birds, cormorants sink low in the water with their water-logged feathers, which

helps them to dive deeply into the water much like a scuba diver wearing lead weights. When resting on land, they are easy to recognize as they spread out their wings like laundry to dry their water-soaked feathers.

You will see egrets shuffling along shallow waters in the marsh grasses hoping to stir up small fish, insects, clams, and other mollusks with their feet. Their long necks and sharp beaks help them catch their prey. In the air, they are also unmistakable with their great white wing-span, recoiled long neck, and trailing long legs. There are two types of egrets: the great egret and the snowy egret. When we spot an egret, I ask our guests the color of its beak. If the answer is yellow, it is a great egret.

When you venture onto the east and west branches of the Westport River, you are struck by their natural beauty, and lushness. Typical of water-front property, there are some houses lining the banks, but there are vast stretches of pristine land that are protected by land trusts from all future development. Such are my first impressions, as a guide for Westport River Watershed Alliance's new river tours. The program is especially oriented to those who have not experienced the beauty of the Westport River. The tour includes Captain Bill Chase, who owns and operates the boat, myself as a nature guide, and up to six guests. It's an ideal experience for families.

