



Protected Species - American Oystercatcher

Description and Status



The American oystercatcher is a large distinctive shorebird with a long, chisel-shaped, bright red to orange bill; black head and breast; dark gray back and wings; white belly; and pink legs. This bird is aptly named since it specializes in feeding on bivalves (oysters, clams, and mussels). The American oystercatcher is listed as a species of concern by the Southeastern Shorebird Conservation Plan, a conservation strategy for migratory birds and their habitats developed by partners from governmental and non-governmental organizations from across the country.

Life History

The American oystercatcher is the largest shorebird breeding along the U.S. Atlantic coast. The eastern race of the American oystercatcher breeds along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts from Massachusetts to southern Mexico and in scattered locations in the Caribbean. The species winters from New Jersey southward.

This territorial species requires sizeable undisturbed areas to successfully breed. Breeding activity is from late February to the end of August. This shy bird nests in coastal areas on open, sparsely vegetated sand or shell beaches, dunes, salt marsh, and occasionally on dredge spoil. In North Carolina, they nest mainly on high, sandy

sites. The oystercatcher makes solitary nests that are shallow depressions often lined with shells, shell fragments, pebbles, or bits of tide wrack. The average clutch size is two to three eggs. The young hatch about 24-29 days after egg laying and fledge at about 5 weeks. In general, only one clutch is laid but a female may lay a second clutch if the nest is destroyed early.

Threats

Initial decline in numbers of the American oystercatcher is believed to be due to egg-collecting.

Current threats include, but are not limited to:

- Predators including other large birds, raccoons, fox, dogs, feral and domestic cats
- Weather events, including high tides
- Recreational and commercial development including pedestrian and vehicular traffic
- Human disturbance including vandalism

American Oystercatchers on the Cape Hatteras National Seashore

The number of American oystercatcher breeding pairs on the Cape Hatteras National Seashore has been slowly declining since monitoring began in 1999. Reproductive efforts of these breeding pairs have been highly variable with great fluctuations in productivity.

Although weather events in 2003 greatly impacted nesting American oystercatchers, Hurricane Isabel, which occurred after the nesting season, created new habitat for these and other nesting birds as well as reducing cover for predators.

In 2004, twenty-nine pairs of oystercatchers were documented with thirty-nine nests located. This

represents a twenty-nine percent decline in breeding pairs since 1999. Fifty-nine percent of the nests hatched for a total of forty-seven chicks; the highest hatching success since 1999. Nineteen of the chicks fledged. The 2004 season hatch rate was the highest hatching success since monitoring began.

Many pairs were able to raise one or more chicks on their initial nesting attempt, thus reducing the number of re-nests.