Common Name: AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER

Scientific Name: *Haematopus palliatus* Temminck

Other Commonly Used Names: Mantled oystercatcher, sea crow, brown-backed oystercatcher

Previously Used Names: None

Family: Haematopodidae

Rarity Ranks: G5/S2

State Legal Status: Rare

Federal Legal Status: Not listed

Federal Wetland Status: N/A

Description: This large, boldly patterned shorebird reaches 40-44 cm (16-17 in) in length. Its dark brown back contrasts with a black head and neck, red eye-ring, and yellow iris to make it distinctive from other shorebirds. The underside of the body is white, the legs are a pale flesh color, and the laterally compressed 10 cm (4 in) bill is deep orange to red with a yellowish tip.

The tip of the bill is blunt and chisel-like, aiding in the opening of shellfish. Interestingly, eye color has been noted to darken with age, aiding researchers in the aging of these birds. While this species is sexually dimorphic, with females tending to be larger, there is considerable overlap in size. Adult plumage does not vary from female to male and sexes are indistinguishable in the field by sight. Bill and eye ring color become more intense prior to and through the nesting season.

Similar Species: None.

Habitat: This species exists on the highly dynamic edge of estuarine and marine coastal environments throughout its range, rarely straying any distance from saltwater. **A**long the U.S. Atlantic Coast the American oystercatcher has been documented nesting on marsh islands, upland dunes, beaches, and on dredge spoils. In Georgia preferred nesting sites are areas of beach with broad sandy berms or terraced flats that are above the mean (average) high tide line. These areas often occur at the northern or southern ends of barrier islands and at the tips of sand spits near inlets. The highest density of nesting occurs on Little Egg Island Bar in the mouth of the Altamaha River, where 18-24 pairs of oystercatchers nest annually. This number of pairs is equivelent to all of the pairs nesting on Cumberland, Little St. Simons, and St. Catherines Islands combined. They also frequently use oyster shell mounds called "shell rakes" along the Intracoastal Waterway and in some of the state's largest sounds. Oystercatchers have been documented nesting in small numbers on dredged material disposal sites in Brunswick and Kings Bay. This species nests on all of Georgia's undeveloped barrier islands, although with varying success. Foraging habitat includes shellfish beds, shoals, and intertidal sand and mud flats. After the breeding season flocks of oystercatchers can be seen along the southeast Atlantic Coast from Virginia to Georgia. In the fall and winter flocks of 50-60 birds are regularly seen on Georgia's coast with flocks occasionally as large as 400–600 birds on the islands at the mouth of the Altamaha River.

Diet: Oystercatchers eat a wide range of marine invertebrate animals including, oysters, clams, whelks, crabs, and worms.

Life History: Oystercatchers reach reproductive maturity at 3-4 years of age. Females usually lay 1-3 eggs about 24-36 hours apart. Incubation requires 24-27 days and both sexes participate. If a clutch is destroyed, oystercatchers usually lay a replacement clutch within about 2 weeks, and can recycle like this as many as four or five times in a season if needed. Oystercatchers are solitary nesters and mated pairs aggressively defend nesting territories and adjacent foraging territories from other oystercatchers. The size of the territory varies with habitat characteristics. When approached by humans, incubating birds inconspicuously leave their nest before initiating a series of loud distraction calls, often taking flight and circling the intruder repeatedly. Many oystercatchers nest among colonies of royal terns, least terns, and black skimmers in Georgia and throughout their nesting range. Breeding pairs have been observed to mate for several consecutive years, and it is possible many mate for life. The American oystercatcher's life span is probably 10-30 years. Notable behavioral characteristics are loud territorial displays with tail raised and neck arched, aggressive defense of nests and young often with aerial chases of much larger predatory birds, and skillful foraging techniques. Adept at locating open mussels and oysters in shallow water, this species will quickly stab the bivalve, cut the adductor muscle, and

separate the top and bottom halves of the shell. It then consumes the soft contents. This all happens in a matter of seconds. The oystercatcher also uses its bill for digging and prying other clams and worms out of the sand.

Survey Recommendations: Nesting oystercatchers are best surveyed from late April through June when pairs can be located most easily from boats or the air. Pedestrian surveys can also be effective on some beaches as well. A safe distance should be maintained to prevent undue stress on nesting pairs. Wintering birds can be effectively surveyed by air at high tide when they are concentrated on higher portions of beach and shell bars. The mid-winter shorebird survey could be used to generate a coast-wide index of oystercatcher numbers; however, estimates generated using this survey can vary widely due to limitations in survey coverage, weather conditions, and other factors.

Range: The breeding range of the eastern race of the American oystercatcher extends along the Atlantic Coast from Massachusetts to southern Florida and along the Gulf Coast from Florida to Mexico. Permanent, year-round residents can be found in the Bahamas and islands in the Caribbean. A western population is found from Baja California south to Argentina and Chile in South America. The highest breeding densities in the United States occur in Virginia and the Carolinas, with large postbreeding flocks gathering on the coasts of the Carolinas and Georgia in fall and winter. The area surrounding Cedar Key on the Gulf Coast of Florida is a particularly valuable wintering site for birds from U.S. Atlantic Coast breeding populations.

Threats: Shooting for the restaurant industry and egg collection in the late 1800s, habitat loss from coastal development, and disturbance of nests by humans and their pets have traditionally been the most significant threats to the American oystercatcher, rendering the species scarce in much of its range for the last century. Researchers attribute a current slow population rebound to the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, which outlawed hunting and collection of eggs. However, disturbance from beach recreation, pollution of coastal waters, and coastal development continue to threaten this bird. Recent increases in human use of coastal habitats could lead to increased disturbance of nesting and brood rearing activities that reduce reproduction and subsequently lead to population declines. Sea level rise and changes in the abundance and distribution of food resources due to climate change may also threaten this bird in the future.

Georgia Conservation Status: The lower Altamaha River delta and Little St. Simons Island currently have the highest concentration of breeding pairs (approximately 30 for both sites combined) in the state. Other important breeding areas include Cumberland and Little Tybee Islands and the shell rakes of St. Catherines and Wassaw sounds.

Conservation and Management Recommendations: By the turn of the 20th century unrestricted hunting and egg collection had led to the extirpation of the oystercatcher along the Atlantic Coast north of Virginia and it was scarce throughout the remainder of its range in the U. S. Numbers increased after passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (1918), and the species slowly reclaimed the northern portion of its range. Despite increases in oystercatcher numbers, estimates of the U. S. breeding population remain as low as 11,000 birds. This species was also rare in Georgia during the early 1900s and nested on Cumberland, Sea, Egg (Altamaha River),

Cabbage, and Tybee Islands and Raccoon Key. Estimates of the Georgia breeding population increased from about 35 pairs at mid-century to 86 pairs in 1999. The species is currently listed as a species of extremely high priority in the Southeastern section of the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan because of continued loss of breeding habitat to development and apparent population declines in Virginia, North Carolina, and the Atlantic coast of Florida. Although evidence of recent population declines in Georgia is lacking there are fewer than 100 breeding pairs and the species is confined to the coast's more remote areas. Reproductive success is low, with as few as 12 percent of pairs hatching eggs and 5 percent fledging chicks. Depredation of eggs and chicks by mammalian and avian predators, and flooding of nests during high spring tides and storms are the primary causes of reproductive failure. Coastal development and increased human use of beaches and other coastal areas is the greatest immediate threat to oystercatcher populations along the Atlantic seaboard. Growing recreational use of beaches may force nesting pairs away from beach habitat toward less productive marsh habitats. Sea level rise associated with climate change may be a significant threat in the future by reducing available nesting habitat. Current conservation measures include access restrictions on certain sand spit islands, control of invasive vegetation at some key breeding sites, and studies to determine the effects of human disturbance and contaminants on oystercatcher reproduction.

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M. Harris, 1999: original account
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K. Owers, July 2010: updated status and ranks, added pictures
G. Krakow, April 2016: deleted dead URL under Hunter, W. C


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