

CONSERVE WILDLIFE FOUNDATION OF NEW JERSEY

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER

Haematopus palliatus

The American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) is listed as a species of special concern in New Jersey. The Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey works to monitor and protect oystercatchers in New Jersey. We also work closely with national groups such as the American Oystercatcher Working Group and its partners to protect oystercatchers throughout other parts of their range.

If you spend time along the New Jersey coast, there's a good chance you have seen or heard an oystercatcher. Standing nearly a foot and a half tall with a long orange-red bill, the stocky black, brown, and white oystercatcher is not easily overlooked. Their loud calls and gregarious behavior makes them even harder to miss.

Breeding in New Jersey

In New Jersey, oystercatchers return to nest in early March and establish breeding territories soon after arriving. The birds form mating pairs by late-March and quickly begin courtship rituals. Nests consist of a shallow depression scraped in the sand or marsh substrate. Oystercatchers usually lay three eggs that hatch after approximately 27 days. Oystercatchers will lay new nests if the initial nest(s) are destroyed or if their young are preyed on early in the breeding season. Chicks are precocial (highly developed upon hatching), but are generally fed by their parents. Chicks are considered fledged (able to fly) at about 35 days. Oystercatchers feed almost exclusively on bivalves, mollusks, crustaceans, worms and other marine invertebrates that inhabit intertidal areas.



An adult American oystercatcher.

Breeding habitat in New Jersey primarily consists of coastal beaches, inlet spits, and back-bay salt marshes. New Jersey's breeding population is estimated to be approximately 350-400 pairs, although an entire statewide survey has not been conducted to date. About 15%-20% of the state's pairs breed on beach habitat and are the most studied segment of the population, but the majority nest in salt marsh habitat. Other pairs nest on dredge spoils and in estuarine habitats. Based on the size of its breeding population, New Jersey ranks among the top five U.S. states along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts in terms of importance for implementing stated conservation goals for oystercatchers.



An American oystercatcher chick.

Migration and Wintering

New Jersey is also important for oystercatchers during the non-breeding season. Oystercatchers form staging flocks from July through November prior to migration. New Jersey is also the northernmost state in the wintering range, and in some years, hosts nearly 1,000 oystercatchers, just under 10% of the population. Other New Jersey oystercatchers move south into wintering areas from Virginia to Florida. Unlike the breeding season when they are

highly territorial, oystercatchers gather in large roost flocks in the fall and winter. The flocks, which are generally in or near inlets, vary considerably in size. In New Jersey, flocks in Absecon and Hereford Inlets are especially important as 200-400 birds can be found utilizing these inlets and often account for the majority of birds present during the non-breeding season. More recent surveys in New Jersey have found oystercatchers use nearly all the inlets in the state during migration.

Banding Information

Since 2005, banding of oystercatchers in New Jersey has been performed following the protocols established by the American Oystercatcher Working Group. Data collected are used to identify oystercatcher distribution, abundance, reproductive success, survival, site fidelity, and other habitat use. Researchers in New Jersey band the birds with

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duplicate orange bands with two engraved black letters/numbers on its upper legs. Nearly 350 oystercatchers, including both adults and chicks, have been color-banded in New Jersey to date and the effort to increase the marked population continues. If you happen to see a banded oystercatcher, you can help our research by reporting it at amoywg.org/banding-re-sighting/.

Range-wide Population

During the winter of 2002-03 a range-wide aerial survey conducted from New Jersey to Florida and along the Gulf coast led to a population estimate of approximately 11,000 oystercatchers. In the winter of 2013, another range-wide survey will be conducted to assess whether the population has changed.

Threats

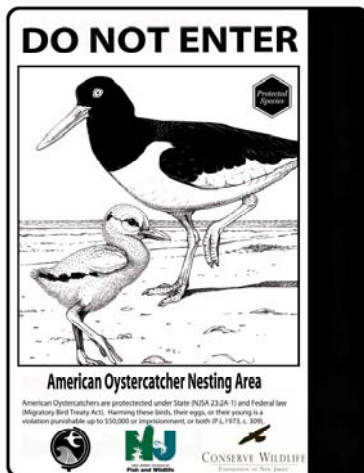
Threats to oystercatchers include habitat loss from development, human disturbance, predation, pollution and other impacts to food resources, climate change, and sea level rise. Human disturbance is an issue across the entire breeding range, but is especially problematic in New Jersey, where much of the suitable nesting habitat for oystercatchers is subject to high levels of human use and intense recreational activity. Threats from human disturbance include vehicle use, boats and personal watercraft, pedestrians, pets on the beach, other recreation, and municipal maintenance activities. Human disturbance at breeding and foraging sites can limit reproductive success by direct human destruction of nests, destruction of nesting substrates, or continual disturbance such that oystercatcher adults cannot protect their nests or forage sufficiently. Nests where adults are flushed from the sites are more likely to succumb to predation. Likewise, unattended chicks can be vulnerable to predation if adults are disturbed. Eliminating or reducing human disturbance can be difficult to achieve, but is critical to ensure breeding success and long-term survival of oystercatchers. Both mammalian and avian species can predate oystercatcher adults, eggs, and their chicks. Predator species include red fox, coyote, domestic and feral cats, skunk, raccoon, crows, gulls, and others.



A New Jersey banded American oystercatcher.

Conservation Measures

New Jersey's coastal zone is so highly developed that intense management of nesting sites is necessary if oystercatchers are to successfully breed. As a result, each year the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey and other partners protect nesting areas with fencing and signage to alert beachgoers where oystercatchers are nesting and to prevent nests and young from being disturbed, trampled, or run over. Paid seasonal stewards and dedicated volunteers patrol the nesting areas to monitor human disturbance and other recreational activities, as well as educate beachgoers. Beach management plans have been developed and implemented with coastal communities to minimize impacts on nesting birds from municipal management, beach maintenance, and other uses of the beach. Other areas, such as National Wildlife Refuges, are closed to certain public activities to allow for birds and other wildlife to survive undisturbed. Data collected during the breeding and migratory seasons are used to track the oystercatcher population, gauge reproductive success, and identify threats. It is highly unlikely oystercatchers would survive in New Jersey without this extensive monitoring and protection effort.



CWF is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting New Jersey's endangered and threatened wildlife and the habitats they depend on for survival. We accomplish this through research and conservation projects and education and outreach programs that advance the protection of New Jersey's rarest wildlife residents.

For more information, visit www.conservewildlifenj.org

