

Black Oystercatcher

Haematopus bachmani



Photo by Monika Wieland

Physical Description:

Black oystercatchers are a large (up to 18 inches long), all-dark shorebird with a long, bright-red bill. They have stout, pale pink legs and bright yellow eyes. Immatures are duller and browner with a dark tip to their bill, and they get adult plumage after one year.

Natural History:

Black oystercatchers are chunky, non-migratory shorebirds found all along the Pacific Coast. Their dark coloration camouflages them against the rocks, but their loud piping whistles often make them conspicuous.

Reproduction:

In the spring pairs defend breeding territories and engage in highly vocal flight displays. Pairs seem to form long-term bonds and return to the same site to breed year after year. They nest just above the high tide line in gravel or rocky depressions, where they lay up to four eggs in a nest lined with beach debris. Eggs are incubated for about 27 days and the young fledge 30 days after hatching.

Life Cycle:

After the chicks fledge, oystercatchers often stay in family groups as the young master foraging for their own food. Family groups may stay together through the fall and winter, or birds may congregate in larger flocks of several dozen birds until the next breeding season when nesting pairs again become territorial. Juveniles do not disperse far from where they were hatched. Black oystercatchers can live for up to 30 years.

Range:

They range all along the coast of western North America, from the Aleutian Islands to Baja California. Since they are non-migratory they are found throughout most of their range year-round, though they are more abundant in the northern portion of their range. They are more numerous in the San Juan Islands than in Puget Sound.

Diet:

Oystercatchers have laterally flattened bills that help them pry shells off rocks and, if necessary, open them. They can also use their bills to probe the sand, though they do this rarely. Mollusks make up most of their diet, and black oystercatchers particularly favor limpets. They may also feed on crabs and barnacles.

Threats:

Black oystercatchers are at risk from oil spills, coastal development, and pollution of the intertidal zone. Nesting site disturbance, particularly by boaters, is a major concern, as pairs will vacate the area leaving their eggs and chicks unprotected from scavengers and predators. Increasing seal and sea lion populations actually also pose a threat to oystercatchers, as pinnipeds haul out on the rocky outcroppings that are ideal for breeding oystercatchers.

When it comes to conservation, the IUCN considers them a species of least concern, and in fact they were downgraded from their classification of “lower risk” in 2000. However, because of their small population size, sensitivity to disturbance, and specialized habitat requirements, groups in both Oregon and Washington have identified them as a species of high concern.

Fun Facts:

- Oystercatchers often forage in the wave zone, where mussels that are being splashed are more likely to be open. If they find an open mussel, they will disable it with a quick jab to the adductor mussel, allowing them to eat the contents without the mussel closing.
- Black oystercatchers are considered a keystone species for the health of rocky intertidal habitats along the North Pacific coast since they are highly sensitive to various disturbances.
- There are about 10,000 black oystercatchers in the world. About 400 of them live in Washington. There are 100 nesting sites in Washington.
- Despite their name, black oystercatchers actually do not eat oysters.

Sources:

National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, Fourth Edition

Stokes Field Guide to Birds ~ Western Region by Donald and Lillian Stokes

Birding in the San Juan Islands by Mark Lewis and Fred Sharpe

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<http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black_Oystercatcher>

“Black oystercatcher” on Bird Web, the site of the Seattle Audubon Society

<http://www.seattleaudubon.org/birdweb/bird_details.aspx?id=148>

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