



Arguably the most beautiful shorebird on the East Coast, the American Oystercatcher, is highly vocal and relatively easy to photograph



Takeoffs are very special!

## **Brunswick Wildlife**

### **American Oystercatcher: Shorebird Superstar**

Wheer! Wheer! The oystercatcher's loud whistle during a flyby or from incoming birds is easily recognized. I get my camera ready for a quality photo op of one of the East Coast's most beautiful shorebirds.

American Oystercatchers are large shorebirds common in salt marshes and on sand beaches. They are year-round residents of the Lower Cape Fear and nest on our beaches and barrier islands, including spoil islands, such as those in the Cape Fear River. They share habitat on these islands with Willets, Laughing Gulls, and Black Skimmers plus tern colonies.

Oystercatcher populations, from Maryland and north, generally migrate to join southern populations so we may see more during the winter. These are social birds that forage and roost in small flocks; however, in winter or migration, the flocks may number in the hundreds. In our area, check the basin at Ft. Fisher for relative large winter flocks.

American Oystercatchers are common, easily recognizable, and highly vocal shorebirds. They are relatively large and chunky with brown above and white under parts. Most distinctive is their head, having a yellow eye with red eye-ring, black hood, and long and broad red bill.

Oystercatchers fly fast and straight, with quick and steady wing beats. To say they are very photogenic is an understatement and, fortunately, they are fairly easy to photograph because of their size and flight behavior.

Oystercatchers forage on intertidal mud flats, oyster or mussel beds, and rocky shorelines. In sand or intertidal mud flats, they often feed along edge of a receding tide and also probe to find tasty marine worms. In shellfish beds they feed while mussels or oysters are still submerged. At high tide, they roost on beaches, sandbars, rock jetties, and rocky coasts above the tide level.

Oystercatchers are one of a few species that specialize on saltwater bivalve mollusks and are therefore found only in marine habitats. Their diet is composed almost exclusively of bivalves, mollusks, and worms that inhabit intertidal areas. Occasionally, they may be found foraging for worms on nearby flooded farm fields.

They locate mussels or oysters visually, wading through barely submerged shellfish beds, moving with alternating left and right turns. When an open bivalve is found, the oystercatcher inserts its bill into the open valves and probes with deep jabs. Once it severs the adductor muscle, which holds the valves together, the bird eats the soft parts inside.

Oystercatchers sometimes use a “hammering” technique. They remove an individual mussel from a clump and carry it on shore. They then hammer at the point where the adductor muscle lies inside the shell. They break through the shell and quickly sever the adductor which allows the two halves to split.

Oystercatchers use scrape nests for their two or three-egg clutches. Nest-scraping starts as an element of courtship, sometimes a few weeks before egg laying. They may make five or more scrapes, abandoning all but the perfect one. Though both mates participate in scraping, it is mostly by accomplished by the male.

Nests are shallow depressions scraped out of the sandy substrate, often lined with shells, shell fragments, pebbles, or bits of wrack. Nests are usually on slightly elevated sites and rarely in sand dunes. Elevation is above mean high tide, sometimes as much as three feet above sea level.

Oystercatchers, like other beach nesting birds, are susceptible to habitat loss and destruction caused by human encroachment. The passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918 greatly lessened human impact. Populations rebounded slowly as they gradually reclaimed much of their breeding range; however, with less than ten thousand birds today, their population is still well below historic numbers.

Recent establishment of large coastal reserves, including National Wildlife Refuges and Audubon Important Bird Areas (IBA), have helped protect their current breeding grounds. The IBA spoil islands of the Cape Fear are a valuable part of this effort in North Carolina.

Though their numbers are increasing to some degree, they are classified as a species of national conservation concern on Audubon's WatchList because totals are so small. Their future success, however, depends on coexistence with humans in salt marshes and dunes areas. Their range is thought to be limited by availability of intertidal mudflats with shellfish beds

Conservation efforts are tracked through a banding program. My photograph above of Green (X3) was taken on November 11, 2007. I researched the banding database to find more about my bird.

It is one of three siblings of parents Green (R9) and Green (12). The young fledged on the South Beach of Cape Hatteras National Seashore in 2007. They were originally banded on

July 14. The next reported sighting of Green (X3), after my photo, was the following summer, in early August 2008, at the Rachel Carlson NERR off Beaufort.

More information on oystercatcher conservation issues and the banding program may be found at <http://www.ncsu.edu/project/grsmgis/AMOY/Banding.htm>, including details on how to report sightings.

It is fun to know more about your bird and the data provides valuable input to support research so please report sightings or dead birds!

John Ennis



During winter, one of the best places for observing oystercatchers, in larger flocks, is at the basin at Ft. Fisher



Note the green tag on the upper right leg. I photographed "Green X3" at Cape Hatteras on November 11, 2007.



An oystercatcher's "scrape nest" could never be called elaborate. They may make five or more scrapes, abandoning all but the perfect one.