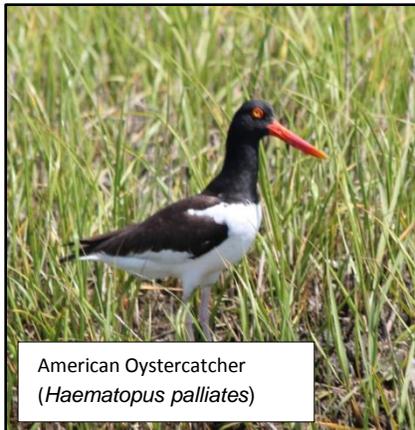


American Oystercatchers: Why They Count

With their bright orange beaks and distinctive yellow eyes, American Oystercatchers (*Haematopus palliatus*) are among the most recognizable shorebirds on the East Coast. Oystercatchers are uniquely adapted for life in coastal areas, with long, thin beaks that are specially designed for preying on (you guessed it) oysters and other shellfish by severing the muscle in bivalves that clamps shells closed. Oystercatchers also use coastal habitats such as



American Oystercatcher
(*Haematopus palliatus*)

elevated dunes and marsh grass to build their nests. While guarding their nests, Oystercatchers are known for displaying protective behaviors when approached by predators or humans. With their unique coloring, feeding adaptations, and social behavior, American Oystercatchers delight birdwatchers and beachgoers in North Carolina and beyond.

However, like many other shorebirds, Oystercatchers face threats to their habitat and food sources in the form of increased coastal development, disturbance from human recreational activities, and pollution that affects the quality of their shellfish prey. As a species dependent on coastal ecosystems with specific habitat requirements for feeding and nesting, Oystercatchers could also be vulnerable to habitat loss from rising sea-levels and climate change. The American Oystercatcher is currently listed as a species of special concern in North Carolina and as a species of high concern in U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service conservation plans for the East Coast.

Due to conservation concerns for Oystercatchers along the Eastern Seaboard, the N.C. Coastal Reserve often participates in annual American Oystercatcher surveys, coordinated by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, to monitor the population and breeding status of birds within certain areas of the Reserve. Because Oystercatchers are highly visible, thanks to their distinctive coloring, and exhibit strong site fidelity, they are ideal candidates for a shorebird population survey. North Carolina Coastal Reserve Central Sites Manager Paula Gillikin led the first 2013



American Oystercatcher nest site
at the Rachel Carson Reserve

Rachel Carson Reserve site survey on May 22, guiding interns and staff in Oystercatcher identification and observation. The survey was conducted around the estuary habitats of the Rachel Carson Reserve site. Researchers looked for the presence of Oystercatchers along the marsh fringe, and once a bird was spotted, determined if the bird was part of a nesting pair and whether a nest was present. Territorial displays by Oystercatcher pairs often indicated the presence of a nest site and/or eggs. During the course of the survey, seventeen Oystercatchers were identified, along with one egg-filled nest. Results will be sent to North Carolina wildlife biologists who will compile results from across the state.

From their unique predatory behavior to their unusual coloring, American Oystercatchers are one of the coast's most charismatic bird species. Understanding where they live and how they reproduce will help coastal managers protect their habitat and food resources for the future.

If you would like to learn more about American Oystercatchers, please visit:

<http://amoywg.org/research-sites/north-carolina/>

http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American_Oystercatcher/id