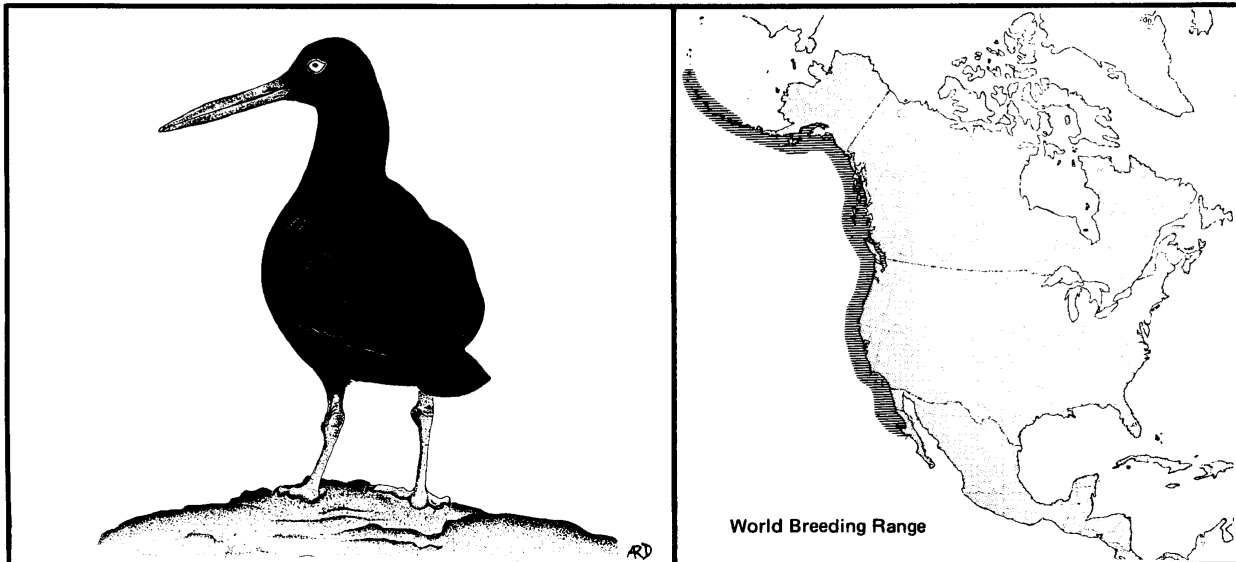


Black Oystercatcher (*Haematopus bachmani*)



Black Oystercatchers are distinctive shorebirds inhabiting the rocky shorelines of the coast from Baja California to the western Aleutian Islands. Adults establish breeding territories on offshore rocks and islands and occasionally on mainland rocky beaches. An oystercatcher nest, composed of a scrape lined with pebbles and shell fragments, is difficult to find. One to three cryptically-colored eggs are placed directly on the pebbles.

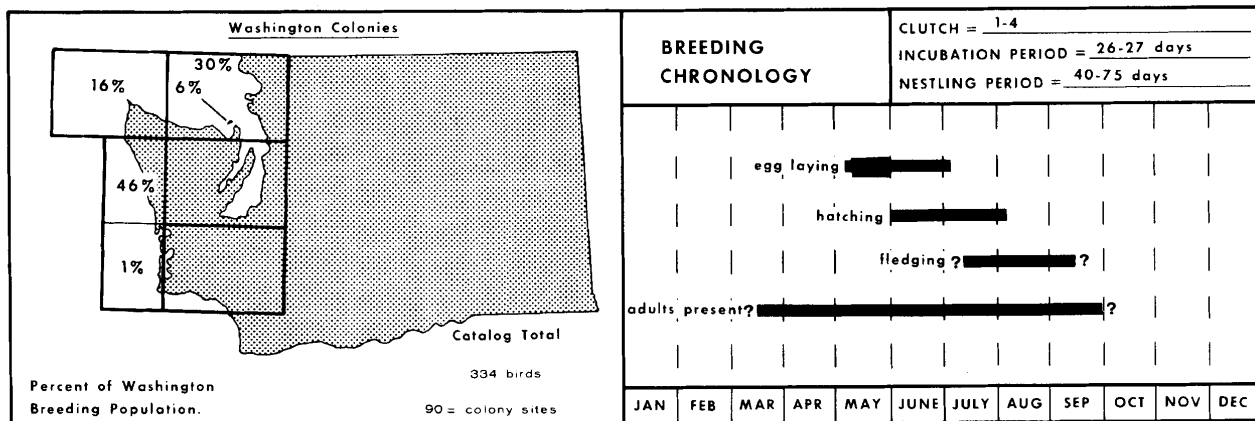
The young oystercatchers are precocial and may leave the nest within hours of hatching. Although they remain near the nest the first few days, chicks later follow adults to intertidal foraging areas. The food consists of mussels (Hunt et al. 1979), limpets, and chitons; chicks may be fed crabs (Hartwick 1976; Helbing 1977).

Mortality among eggs and chicks is apparently high. Hartwick (1974) lists gull predation as an important cause of mortality. In addition, chicks and eggs are frequently "washed overboard" from nests by storm waves.

During the winter, oystercatchers are gregarious (Wahl et al. 1981), and flocks may be found roosting in some localities. In the San Juan Islands, the entire population may gather into three or four such flocks (Wahl et al. 1981). With their strange, vermillion-colored bills, pale pink feet, and loud, distinctive calls, the crow-sized black oystercatchers are a characteristic species of exposed rocky shorelines in Washington.

WASHINGTON COLONIES

Black Oystercatchers are a non-colonial nesting species nesting



at about 100 different locations in Washington. They are usually found on the same offshore islands and rocks as colonial nesting species. They establish large nesting and feeding territories and thus distribute themselves along the available coastal habitat. While censusing nesting oystercatchers can be difficult because approach must be close enough to initiate a reaction from territorial adults, the catalog total for the inland marine waters is probably quite accurate because calm waters and limited size of the study area made coverage thorough. Numbers for the exposed outer coast are probably less accurate due to more rigorous conditions and lower sampling effort there. We feel the total breeding population for the State is unlikely to be more than 400 birds.

HISTORICAL STATUS AND VULNERABILITY

The Black Oystercatcher was among the first birds reported in Washington when Menzies (1792) found and ate birds on Smith Islands on 6 June 1792. Black

Oystercatcher populations in Washington have probably been relatively stable over historical time, though numbers may be somewhat higher on the outer coast due to abandonment of lighthouse stations and other human uses of islands now under refuge protection. Numbers in inside waters may have declined due to increased human activities, but reports of nesting attempts at sites where the species had previously been unreported may mean the species is reoccupying its original range or expanding into new areas.

These birds require clean and undisturbed rocky coastlines for nesting and feeding. To the extent that these areas are disturbed by humans, reproductive success will be reduced. Oil spills, which foul rocky coastlines where oystercatchers feed within the narrow band of intertidal exposure, could seriously affect their food supplies, but losses from direct oiling would probably be low. Long-term degradation of intertidal habitat would almost certainly cause population decline.