

American Oystercatcher

Haematopus palliatus



TPWD PHOTO



The American oystercatcher is an easily recognized shorebird that makes its home on the beach or near salt marshes and mudflats. The bird's long orange bill is shaped like a knife. It uses its beak to pry open oysters and other bivalves for food, hence the name "oystercatcher."

Coastal Wetlands

American Oystercatcher

Haematopus palliatus



APPEARANCE

Height: 17 to 21 inches (43 to 53 cm)

Wingspan: 35 inches (89 cm)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Orange bill 3 to 4 inches (7.5 to 10 cm) long
- Thick pink legs
- Bright yellow eyes with red rings around them
- Black or dark brown backs with black heads and necks
- White bellies and breasts and white stripes on their wings

LIFE HISTORY

Range: Along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of North America and south along the Pacific Coast of South America

Diet: Oysters, clams, barnacles, starfish, crabs, jellyfish, limpets, chitons, marine worms and other invertebrates

Predators: Large *raptors* (birds of prey); raccoons and skunks prey on the eggs

Sexual maturity: At one year

Mating season: February through July

Nests: Shallow depressions scraped into higher parts of sandy or rocky beaches above the high tide line.

Eggs: Two to four buff-colored eggs with light and dark brown spots and other marks about 2 by 1.5 inches (5 by 3.8 cm)

Young: The chicks can run within 24 hours of hatching, but it takes up to 60 days for their beaks to become strong enough to pry open their own bivalves. The young birds may remain with their parents for up to six months.

Life span: Ten years or longer

HABITAT

American oystercatchers prefer rocky, sandy or shell beaches, salt marshes and mudflats.

BEHAVIOR

Oystercatchers are very protective of their young. Both parents incubate the eggs. To disguise the speckled eggs, the adults add broken shells or pebbles to the nests. To distract predators, adult birds will fake an injury to attract attention away from the nest or pretend to brood where there is no nest. Oystercatchers sometimes give such extensive care to their young that the adults starve.

NOW YOU KNOW!

- When an American oystercatcher pries an oyster shell open, it quickly clips the bivalve's *adductor muscle* (the muscle that holds its shell shut). The bivalve cannot protect itself and is eaten by its predator.
- Oystercatchers that feed mainly on animals in the soft sand or mud have a more pointed bill than oystercatchers that feed on rocky shorelines.
- The black oystercatcher (*Haematopus bachmani*), the American oystercatcher's cousin, is *endemic to* (or found only on) North America's Pacific Coast.
- Because they live and feed on the seashore, salt builds up in oystercatchers' blood from the salty water. Special glands help the birds drain excess salt out of their system.

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHERS AND PEOPLE

The genus name *Haematopus* is Greek for "blood foot," and refers to the oystercatcher's pink legs. *Palliatus* means "cloaked" in Latin, and refers to the black "cloak" of feathers on its head.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, American oystercatchers were hunted for food and their plumage. When the species became protected under law in 1918, it was near extinction along the Atlantic Coast. Its numbers are now increasing throughout its range. However, as cities and towns grow along beaches in North America, oystercatchers have fewer available nesting areas.