

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

BLACK OYSTERCATCHER

Haematopus bachmani

Family: HAEMATOPODIDAE
B162

Order: CHARADRIIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A permanent resident on rocky shores of marine habitats along almost the entire California coast, and on adjacent islands. Uncommon to locally fairly common in northern and central California and on Channel Islands (Cogswell 1977). Rare on mainland coast south of Pt. Conception (Santa Barbara Co.), and no recent California nesting records south of this locality (Garrett and Dunn 1981). The state breeding population was estimated at about 1000 (Sowls et al. 1980). Distributed fairly evenly along mainland where suitable habitat exists. Concentrations are denser on offshore islands: Farallons support 6%, and Channel Islands 34%, of state population (Sowls et al. 1980).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Undisturbed, rocky coastlines required for feeding. Availability of foraging habitats depends on tidal cycle and ocean swell conditions. Main prey are invertebrates of rocky intertidal areas, principally mussels and limpets, which are pried off, or pulled from the substrate, with the bill. Chief foods on Channel Islands are California mussels, and on Farallon Islands diet consists of California mussels, limpets, a crab (*Oedignathus inermis*), nemertean and polychaete worms, and tenebrionid beetle larvae (Morrell et al. 1979). Mussels, beetle larvae, and marine worms were main prey fed to chicks at the nest on Farallons, but chicks took mostly limpets when foraging with parents (Morrell et al. 1979).

Cover: Cliffs, rock outcrops, offshore rocky islets, jetties and similar features of coastal rocky intertidal habitats are needed for roosting at high tide.

Reproduction: Breeds on undisturbed, rocky, open ocean shores. Nesting ledges must be available beyond the reach of ocean waves, and inaccessible to terrestrial predators. The nest is a slight depression on a rock ledge, usually lined with small rocks or shell pieces, and located just above high tide or splash zone (Cogswell 1977). Nest sites may be used year after year (Palmer 1967).

Water: Fresh water for drinking probably not required.

Pattern: Requires undisturbed stretches of open, rocky coastal habitat for year-round activities.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, circadian activity. Most foraging occurs during the low tide period and some foraging occurs at night. Often roosts during high tide.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Not migratory. Some of northern population moves south in winter, and small numbers appear in nonbreeding areas in fall and winter (Cogswell

1977). Two chicks color-banded on Farallon Islands were seen in Marin and Monterey cos. (DeSante and Ainley 1980).

Home Range: Considerable feeding takes place away from nesting territory in breeding season (Webster 1941). In winter, seldom move more than about 48 km (30 mi) from nesting locations (Palmer 1967). Rarely more than 10 seen in a day, except in certain prime locations (Cogswell 1977). On the 44 ha (109 ac) South Farallon Island in 1972, population of 52 included 20 breeding pairs, which was postulated as maximum for the habitat (Ainley and Lewis 1974).

Territory: Nesting territory flexible, depending on population density and habitat characteristics. On Farallon Islands, area within 20 m (66 ft) of nest defended vigorously against conspecifics and other species; mussel beds up to 60 m (200 ft) from nest defended year-round, but less intensively in winter (Morrell et al. 1979).

Reproduction: Egg-laying begins in early May, and by late September most chicks have fledged (Ainley et al. 1971, 1980, Hunt et al. 1979). Noncolonial, monogamous, and pairs may remain mated for many years (Johnsgard 1981). Clutch size 1-3 eggs; mean 2 (Hartwick 1974). Both parents share in 25-30 day incubation (Cogswell 1977). Chicks precocial; after about 1 wk leave nest and accompany parents to nearby feeding areas. Both parents care for chicks. Chicks fledge at 35-40 days (Hartwick 1974). Usually does not begin breeding until 2nd yr (Palmer 1967). Single-brooded, but lost clutches replaced (Harrison 1978). Mortality high among eggs and chicks, but once adulthood reached mortality low (Harris 1967).

Niche: Highly susceptible to human disturbance. Human activity may cause incubators to abandon nests, leaving eggs and chicks vulnerable to predators such as gulls and ravens. Hartwick (1974) listed gull predation as an important form of egg and chick mortality. Human and domestic animal disturbance on Farallon Islands apparently prevented oystercatchers from breeding between 1860 and the 1950s (Ainley and Lewis 1974). Recreational activity on or near rocky intertidal areas may prevent breeding. Oil spills can affect food supplies by fouling foraging habitats, but losses from direct oiling probably would be low. Storm waves destroy some nests.

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