

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

---

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER

*Haematopus palliatus*

Family: HAEMATOPODIDAE  
B634

Order: CHARADRIIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: T. Kucera, 1998

#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, SEASONALITY

Very rare and irregular resident and visitor, often in association with black oystercatchers (*H. bachmani*), on Channel Islands, coastal promontories from San Luis Obispo to San Diego counties, and the Salton Sea (Grinnell 1915, Small 1994). A small breeding colony exists on Los Coronados Islands, Mexico, just south of the United States. The primary range of the American oystercatcher is the east coast of North America from Cape Cod to the Yucatan Peninsula, and the west coast from northwestern Baja California south to Panama (Nol and Humphrey 1994).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Feeds on bivalves, molluscs, and worms in coastal sand or shell beaches, salt marsh, and rocky islands. In California, coastal records all from rocky shores and reefs; Salton Sea observations were on a gravel shore littered with barnacle shells (Small 1994)

**Cover:** Tied to open, shoreline marine habitats.

**Reproduction:** On the west coast, American oystercatchers nest on banks of shells 1-2 m above high water, or on cobble spits (Nol and Humphrey 1994). On the east coast, they use a wider variety of marsh, beach, and dune habitats.

**Water:** Drinks water (Nol 1985).

**Pattern:** For nesting, prefers rocky or shell areas above high water. Forages on rocky shoreline, shellfish beds, or intertidal sand or mud flats.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Diurnal.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Probably not migratory on the west coast (Nol and Humphrey 1994).

**Home Range:** Not known.

**Territory:** Both sexes defend territory around nest. On east coast, densities ranged from 0.7-13 pairs/ha (Lauro et al. 1992). No territoriality in roosting flocks in winter; weak territoriality on foraging grounds (Cadman 1979).

**Reproduction:** A mean clutch of 2-3 (range 1-6) is laid in spring. Individuals do not breed until 3-4 years of age (Johnsgard 1981).

**Niche:** Adults may be preyed upon by mink (*Mustela vison*), red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*), American crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), and peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) (Nol and Humphrey 1994).

## REFERENCES

- Cadman, M. 1979. Territorial behavior in American oystercatchers (*Haematopus palliatus*).  
Wader Study Group Bull. 27:40-41.
- Grinnell, J. 1915. A distributional list of the birds of California. Pacific Coast Avifauna No. 11
- Lauro, B., E. Nol, and M. Vicari. 1992. Nesting density and communal breeding in the American oystercatchers. Condor 94:286-289.
- Johnsgard, P. A. 1981. The plovers, sandpipers and snipes of the world. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.
- Nol, E. and R. C. Humphrey. 1994. The American oystercatcher. Birds of North America 82:1-21.
- Small, A. 1994. California birds: their status and distribution. Ibis Publishing Co., Vista, CA.

B634

---

Life history accounts for species in the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships (CWHR) System were originally published in: Zeiner, D.C., W.F.Laudenslayer, Jr., K.E. Mayer, and M. White, eds. 1988-1990. California's Wildlife. Vol. I-III. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, California. Updates are noted in accounts that have been added or edited since original publication.