The *American Oystercatcher*, *(Haematopus palliatus)*, is a large shorebird that inhabits coastal islands and salt marshes, with the largest concentrations occurring along the U.S. southeastern coast. This short-distance migratory bird is a species of **High Concern** in the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan, and is **State-listed or designated** by all 13 Atlantic Coast states. Major threats to the species include habitat loss due to coastal development; human-caused disturbance; increased vulnerability to predation; contamination of primary food sources; and sea-level rise and other effects of global climate change. In North America, two races are recognized: *H.p. palliatus* on the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts of North America (from Nova Scotia to eastern Mexico) and in the Caribbean and Central America; and *H.p. frazari* on the Pacific coast from southern California to Mexico. The eastern race is estimated at 11,000 birds, with numbers declining in core Mid-Atlantic breeding areas.

Photo: © Shiloh Schulte

SHOREBIRD RECOVERY
AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER
~ U.S. ACTION SUMMARY ~

Species Description

The American Oystercatcher is the largest shorebird in the Americas (17 inches). Its large, orange-red bill and contrasting black, brown, and white body pattern give it a most distinctive appearance. There are five recognized subspecies in the Western Hemisphere, all occurring in coastal habitats. This species regularly lives more than 10 years and possibly up to 40 years.

Migration

American Oystercatchers are short-distance, partial migrants. Most migrate southward from breeding territories in the fall, although some only move to nearby roost sites adjacent to feeding habitat. In late July and August, oystercatchers begin to gather in staging flocks before fall migration. Migration occurs gradually from the end of August through November. Latitude influences which individuals migrate; most oystercatchers breeding north of New Jersey move south for the winter, but banding data indicate this decision is highly individual. During migration, oystercatchers stay strictly within the coastal zone. Some oystercatchers cross the Florida peninsula, but do not use interior sites during migration. Northward migration begins in late winter. On the Outer Banks of North Carolina, oystercatchers begin to arrive in breeding territories in late February. In Massachusetts, birds begin to arrive by the end of March.

Population Outlook

The *H.p. palliatus* is confined to a small ribbon of habitat along the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf Coasts to the Caribbean and Central America. These birds (approximately 11,000) are highly vulnerable to habitat loss due to coastal development, pollution, sedimentation, and sea-level rise. This subspecies's range is expanding in the Northeast, but numbers are declining in core Mid-Atlantic breeding areas. The American Oystercatcher Working Group has set a recovery goal for 1.5 times the population's current size, and is researching patterns of survival, movement, and dispersal—critical to understanding population trends.

Threats

Coastal development (commercial and residential) significantly reduces or degrades habitat that American Oystercatchers need for every stage of life. **Pollution and sedimentation,** associated with development, seriously degrades the quality of water, food, and habitat available. **Disturbance** from humans, especially recreational activities, negatively affects birds during important lifecycle stages. **Predation** by foxes, raccoons, and feral cats, which thrive in the presence of humans, is the primary source of nest failure. **Global climate change** portends increasingly severe storms that damage habitat and destroy nests, and rising sea levels that alter food and habitat availability.

One of WHSRN's goals is to develop consensus-driven conservation actions for the highest priority shorebirds and their habitats. We thank authors Shiloh Schulte, Stephen Brown, Debra Reynolds, and the American Oystercatcher Working Group for developing the **Conservation Plan for the American Oystercatcher for the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf Coasts.** For more information about this and other species plans, please visit: **http://www.whsrn.org/conservation-plans**

WHSRN
WESTERN HEMISPHERE SHOREBIRD RESERVE NETWORK

Conservation Strategies and Actions

To conserve the American Oystercatcher (*H. p. palliatus*), the recommended high-priority actions for 2007–2017 are:

Identify and protect emerging habitat

Emerging sandbars and sand spits serve as small island havens; they are close to feeding areas but have fewer predators than on mainland or larger islands. These habitats should be acquired or managed for conservation, and be closed to the public and protected from boaters during the breeding season. Disturbance to shell rakes, used for nesting, should be measured and monitored.

Identify and protect key existing habitat areas

Many key oystercatcher sites have no protection status. The following sites host significant numbers of wintering birds and warrant the most immediate protection measures: Folly Island, South Carolina; Intracoastal Waterway near Hilton Head, South Carolina; and the Intracoastal Waterway near Amelia Island, Florida.

Manage protected areas to reduce disturbance

Much of the oystercatcher's habitat is on public land. Land managers with the ability to limit or prevent human disturbance at breeding and wintering sites should establish and consistently implement such programs.

Control populations of nest predators

Trapping and other removal methods of nest predators such as foxes, raccoons, and feral cats have been effective at improving nest success. Managers of habitat with nesting oystercatchers should establish a consistent policy of controlling artificially abundant and non-native predator populations.

Create and maintain new habitat

Oystercatchers readily use dredge spoil islands for nesting and roosting. Design and placement of such islands in relation to oystercatcher foraging areas and gull colonies would help to maximize productivity.

Outreach and education

To help reduce human disturbance to oystercatchers, educational outreach efforts should focus on marinas, beachgoers, and other segments of the recreating public that use beachfront habitats.

- **Natural History:** Most birds do not establish a territory and nest until age 4. Show strong breeding-site fidelity, and are highly territorial. In nonbreeding season, gather in flocks on remote coastal islands, marshes, and shell mounds
- **Nesting habitat:** Accreting undeveloped barrier beaches, sandbars, shell rakes, and salt marsh islands. Nesting density varies by location and habitat type. Females lay 2–4 eggs in a shallow scrape.
- **Foraging habitat:** Coastal areas that support intertidal shellfish beds.
- **Important foods:** Bivalves and other marine invertebrates. Open bivalves by rapidly stabbing shell's adductor muscle with beak. Adults must open shellfish for young until well after fledging.