

Oystercatchers roam the coastlines of almost every continent, inspiring people and creating special memories of encounters with this enigmatic group of shorebirds. There are currently 12 extant species of oystercatcher, after one species, the Canary Islands Oystercatcher, went extinct last century.

The African Black Oystercatcher is a charismatic bird of our shores and much sought after by photographers and birders alike. With its bold black plumage and striking red legs, beak and eyes, it is the perfect iconic species to highlight coastal bird conservation concerns and efforts. With a restricted distribution that ranges from Angola in the west to Mozambique in the east, coupled with low population numbers, this near-endemic species is dependent on ongoing conservation efforts to ensure its population continues to increase.



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A modern-day success story

The African Black Oystercatcher is a modern-day conservation success story, having been downlisted in the regional Red Data Book from Near Threatened in 2000 to Least Concern in 2015, with a 37 per cent rise in population numbers in the past 35 years. The current population is estimated to be some 6700 individuals. This success can be attributed to a combination of reasons: greater access to food as a result of the proliferation of the alien Mediterranean mussel, a ban on vehicle access to beaches since 2001, successful cat eradication on islands and general conservation awareness efforts.

A range expansion for the species has occurred in KwaZulu-Natal, where the oystercatcher was a rare vagrant from the 1940s to 1970s. Today it is a year-round visitor at more than 30 localities and there are breeding records at two known sites.



GERBILUS VERMAAK

CURRENT THREATS

Work remains to be done

Although the African Black Oystercatcher population has grown, work remains to be done. The flipside of the species' increasing numbers is the potential for heightened conflict with people, especially around coastal urban areas as more people flock to beaches. In summer, visitors invariably disturb nesting birds without realising it, not knowing that the birds are there or in the mistaken belief that being close to the birds does not impact negatively on them. Being shy nesters, incubating oystercatchers are reluctant to return to their nests after they have been disturbed. This often results in the eggs overheating and leads to a high failure rate for breeding, especially when disturbances occur frequently throughout the day. Also, opportunistic predators such as Kelp Gulls, and sometimes dogs, will take advantage of repeat disturbances and prey on unprotected eggs and chicks.

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Life cycle

Oystercatchers reach sexual maturity at three (females) to four (males) years of age. They are monogamous and form strong pair bonds, with individuals often remaining together for many years. Their courtship display is a noisy and comical affair, featuring exaggerated slow flights with deep wing beats. The nest is typically a simple scrape in sandy ground and one or two (sometimes three) camouflaged eggs are laid. After about 30 days' incubation, the fluffy chicks hatch and demand all the food the parents can supply for the next 35 to 40 days until they fledge.

Although adults generally remain resident in an area, a large proportion of juveniles wander extensively. Some move westwards as far as Namibia, while others travel eastwards to KwaZulu-Natal and occasionally as far as Mozambique. Most return to their natal areas at two to three years of age to begin their breeding cycle.

Beach ambassadors

The African Black Oystercatcher is a great flagship species for a host of other birds, such as White-fronted Plover, Kelp Gull and Water Thick-knee, that also breed along the South African coastline. All these species face similar issues while breeding, particularly in coastal urban areas or regions with a high number of summer visitors, which makes the charismatic oystercatcher the perfect beach ambassador for all. Common threats include disturbance by people and dogs, predation by domestic animals and a high risk of becoming entangled in human litter, which can frequently result in death.

Current conservation efforts

The Nature's Valley Trust, with support from BirdLife South Africa, is running the #ShareTheShores campaign along sections of the Garden Route coastline. Based on its research, which has identified hotspots for beach-breeding birds, nesting area signs are placed 30 metres away from all oystercatcher and plover nests. In addition, information boards about the birds and their sensitive breeding times are positioned at prominent beach entrances and project brochures are handed out to visitors. Importantly, local municipal by-laws restricting dogs on beaches are now in place to curb disturbance to breeding birds, while highlighting those beaches where they are allowed access without impacting on birds. The use of cartoon characters Rocky the oystercatcher and Sandy the plover and a strong social media campaign are creating greater public awareness of the potential effect people have on these sensitive breeders. In due course, the #ShareTheShores campaign will be rolled out to other coastal areas.

FIVE FUN FACTS

- The oldest African Black Oystercatcher on record was 28 years, 11 months and four days old.
- Females are larger than the males, and have longer, more pointed bills.
- The longest recorded movement for the species is 1515 kilometres, from Knysna to Swakopmund.
- Oystercatchers don't really eat oysters! They eat mostly mussels and other bivalves, polychaetes, whelks and crustaceans.
- The chicks can swim well and can dive to escape danger.



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