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STATUS OF THE AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER, *HAEMATOPUS PALLIATUS*, ON THE ATLANTIC COAST

KIM MAWHINNEY¹, BRAD ALLEN², AND BRIAN BENEDICT³

ABSTRACT - Two recent nesting records for the American oystercatcher, *Haematopus palliatus*, establish new range limits range for this species along the Atlantic coast. In 1997, one pair of American oystercatchers was observed nesting on Green Island, Maine and another pair was observed in Clark's Harbour on Cape Sable Island, Nova Scotia. Both nests were monitored throughout the breeding season. Two of three chicks that were hatched on Green Island were believed to have fledged. However, the three chicks hatched on Cape Sable Island were believed to have been depredated by gulls nesting on the island. These are the first confirmed breeding records for the American oystercatcher at both of these locations and the nest in Nova Scotia is the first confirmed breeding record for Canada in this century.

The American oystercatcher, *Haematopus palliatus* Temminck, is believed to have once nested along the entire Atlantic coast as far north as Labrador (Audubon 1835, Bent 1929, Forbush 1912, 1925, Griscom and Snyder 1955). However, this species disappeared from the northern part of its range during the mid-nineteenth century. By 1910, Virginia was listed as the northernmost breeding limit (AOU 1910) and this limit remained static for several decades. In 1939, the first breeding record was obtained in Maryland and, by 1952, they were breeding at three locations in Worcester County (Stewart and Robbins 1958). The species continued to increase on the beaches of southern New Jersey in the early 1940s and in 1947 the first nest was found (Kramer 1948). During the early 1950s, a number of breeding season occurrences were recorded on Long Island, New York and the first nest was found in 1957 (Post 1961). By the early 1960s, it was a regular breeder in the three southern counties (Post and Raynor 1964).

Few records exist prior to 1900 for American oystercatchers north of New Jersey. Audubon's report that they bred on the Atlantic coast as far

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north as Labrador has been questioned. Bent (1929) felt that Audubon was mistaken about the location. Audubon did in fact locate a nest near Cape Whittle on 6 July 1833 (Audubon 1835). Herein lies the confusion. Cape Whittle is located along the St. Lawrence coast, which was part of Labrador well into the 1800s (Fig. 1). Labrador lost this part of the St. Lawrence coast to Quebec in 1825. However, it remained under dispute until March 1927, when the boundary of Labrador was settled in its present location (McEwen 1988). Today, Audubon's "Journey to Labrador" (Chalmers 1973) would only take him to the southeast boundary of Quebec.

According to Bent (1929), there are only six records of occurrence in Massachusetts, three of which were from Chatham or Monomoy Island. Audubon reported oystercatchers in Maine and Grand Manan, New Brunswick (Audubon 1835) and a single specimen was taken at Grand Manan (Baird et al. 1884). Forbush (1912) had information that oystercatchers were seen occasionally at Calais, Maine. The first documented Massachusetts nesting in this century occurred in Martha's Vineyard in 1969 (Finch 1970), followed by additional pairs nesting on and to the north of Monomoy Island, in 1970. By 1987, the breeding range of American oystercatchers expanded 20 km north of Monomoy Island to Nauset Marsh, Massachusetts (Humphrey 1990).

American oystercatchers have re-occupied historic breeding range from Virginia north to Massachusetts. More recently their breeding range has expanded into Maine and Nova Scotia. In 1994, the first American oystercatcher nest in Maine was found on Little Stratton Island, York County (pers. comm., S. Kress, National Audubon Society). However, this one-egg clutch was washed away by high tides. In 1995 and 1996, one pair of American oystercatchers nested successfully on Little Stratton Island, producing two fledglings in each year (3-egg clutch in 1995; 2-egg clutch in 1996). However, two chicks hatched from a 3-egg clutch in 1997 were believed to have failed to fledge (pers. comm., S. Kress, National Audubon Society).

Nesting records north of recent breeding range limit, 1997

On 20 April 1997, two American oystercatchers were observed flying around the southern tip of Green Island, Washington County, Maine, 235 kilometers northeast of Little Stratton Island (Fig. 1). On 4 May, one nest site was located by Mawhinney on the rocks approximately 5 m above the high tide water levels. Two American oystercatchers were first observed in the area of Petit Manan and Green Island during the 1996 breeding season (Despres 1997). However, this is the

first confirmed breeding record for this two-island archipelago. Three buff-coloured eggs with brown and black marking were laid in a shallow depression lined with small stones. This nest was monitored

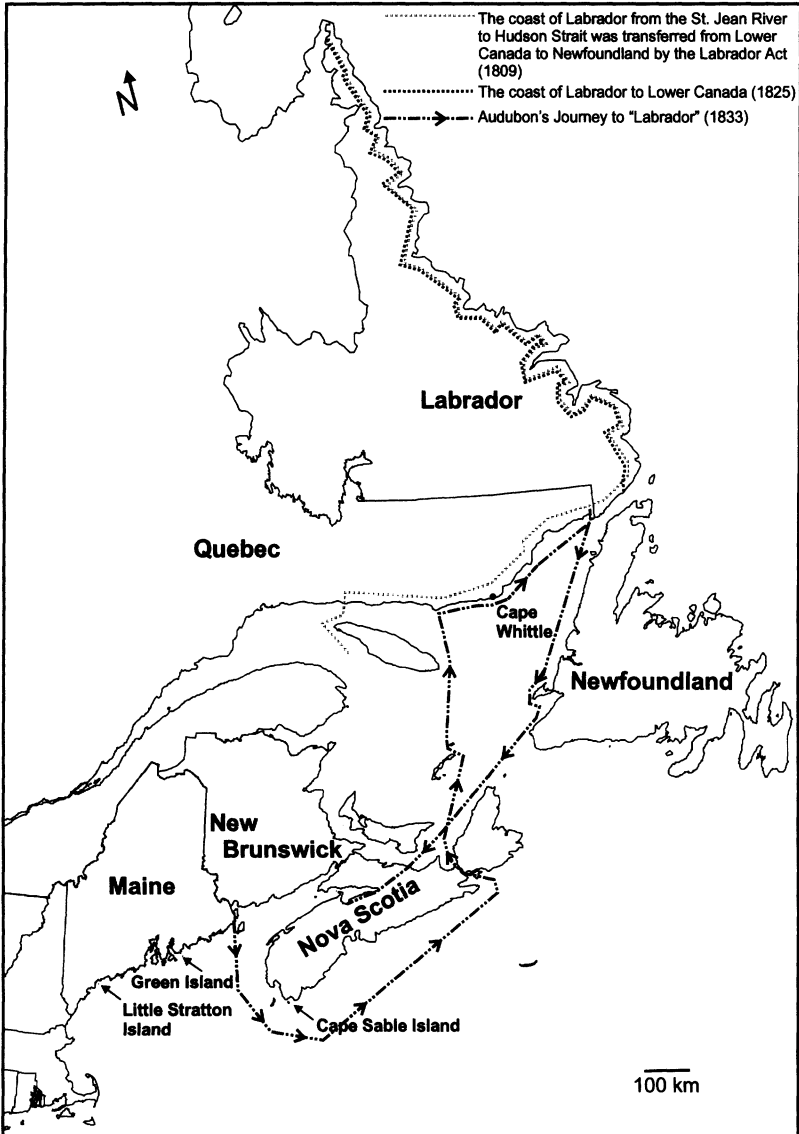


Figure 1. Location of recent nesting records of the American oystercatcher along the Atlantic coast; and the location of Cape Whittle in relation to Audubon's Journey to Labrador in 1833 and the Labrador border.

weekly throughout the 1997 breeding season and on 28 May three eggs hatched. On 8 June, 11 days after hatching, two surviving chicks were captured and fitted with standard USFWS aluminum leg bands. These same two chicks, were observed fully feathered but not yet able to fly, feeding with the two adults on 25 June and both were last observed on 22 July in the company of both adults.

On 24 May 1997 two individuals were spotted in Clark's Harbour on Cape Sable Island, Nova Scotia (Fig. 1). A nest of three eggs was discovered on the pebble beach on 24 June (Mactavish 1997). This is the first confirmed breeding record for Canada in this century. The nest was monitored and all three eggs hatched on 14 July (Mactavish 1997). However, no chicks or fledglings were observed and their fate remains unknown. It is believed that the disturbance caused by visitors to the area may have increased the vulnerability of the chicks that hatched to depredation by gulls nesting on the island (pers. comm., M. Newell).

Initial declines in the breeding range of American oystercatchers resulted from persecution by humans through eggging and hunting, and human occupation of many former nesting habitats up to the early 1900s. Oystercatchers were an easy and desirable target for market gunners (Bent 1929) and were common in the markets of Boston (Forbush 1912). With better protection of nesting birds and the regulation of hunting under the Convention for the Protection of Migratory Birds in 1916, American oystercatchers have re-occupied their historic breeding range. The chief limitation on the oystercatcher population along the coasts of the Atlantic today seems to be the scarcity of suitable nesting sites and the prior occupation of the best areas by gulls (*Larus* spp.) and terns (*Sterna* spp.) (Post and Raynor 1964).

In recent decades, new records for breeding birds along the Atlantic coast indicate that several species may be extending their breeding range or recolonizing traditional breeding grounds. Black-legged kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla* Linnaeus) and razorbills (*Alca torda* Linnaeus) were discovered breeding in the Wolves Archipelago, New Brunswick in 1992 (Kehoe 1994) and 1995 (Mawhinney and Sears 1996), respectively. After nearly a century's absence, common murre (*Uria aalge* Pontoppidan) established themselves at Yellow Murre Ledge, New Brunswick in 1988; and great cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo* Linnaeus) established new southwestern breeding limits in both Maine (1983) and Massachusetts (1984) (Hatch 1984). It is not known yet whether the new nesting records in 1997 for American oystercatchers are extralimital nesting or a permanent range expansion. Further monitoring of their presence and activities at these sites should provide insight into the dynamics of range expansion of this species along the Atlantic coast.

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