

Conservation assessment of the Blackish Oystercatcher

Haematopus ater

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This assessment was difficult because there has been little study of life history or ecology, apart from limited research in the Falklands/Malvinas, where the Blackish Oystercatcher *Haematopus ater* is a resident. The favoured habitat is rocky beaches where limpets and mussels abound. It is infrequent on sandy beaches but small parties of immatures gather in sheltered creeks in winter. Pairs seem to remain in or near breeding territories throughout the year. In the Falklands/Malvinas it is well distributed around all coasts and is possibly more numerous on the east coast of East Falkland; it is thought to be less common than Magellanic Oystercatcher *H. leucopodus*. The population in 1993 was estimated to be between 12,000 and 24,000 individuals. There is some evidence for an increasing population on Chilean coasts and at Kidney Island (32 ha) in the Falklands/Malvinas. The lack of information has made it difficult to decide on priority actions, other than basic biometrical data-gathering. Some concentrated and intensive fieldwork at several localities on the coasts of Chile and Argentina will be necessary when the Wader Study Group decides that it is worthwhile to research the ecology and behaviour of this enigmatic species.

TAXONOMIC STATUS

There are two issues: the dates when M.M. Quoy & Gaimard who described the species, were in the Falklands and the circumstances surrounding the naming of the species.

Firstly, the *Uranie* was holed on 14 February 1820 on a rock ‘off the Cape, which forms the north point of the Bay, a mile and a half from the land, and the ship was sending the waves before her. Suddenly she strikes, and stops’ (Arago 1823). (This Cape would have been Volunteer Point the northern extremity of the opening into Berkeley Sound, East Falkland.) They managed to bail water for 12 hours or more while an officer went off to find a suitable place to beach the corvette. This was achieved. Later, *Uranie* gradually listed to starboard and began to fill with sand.

L. Freycinet, who had been the leader of this round-the-world expedition since 1817, managed to buy an Argentine vessel, the *Mercury*, when it visited the settlement at Port Louis at the head of Berkeley Sound (Freycinet 1824). He renamed this vessel *La Physicienne* and they left the Falklands for Montevideo, Uruguay on 27 April 1820, having spent a little more than 10 weeks living in tents or other improvised shelter and collecting specimens (Boyson 1924).

Secondly, the first listed specimen of *Haematopus ater* was that collected by M.M. Quoy and Gaimard in the Berkeley Sound vicinity during the period described above. Lesson & Garnot (1826) remarked that though M.M. Quoy and Gaimard described this oystercatcher, it was ‘badly figured’ but was ‘a distinct species and not a variety of the Common Oystercatcher *H. ostralegus* which does not exist at all in Les Iles Malouines.’ The specimen is in MNHN at Paris and was located by Jean-Francois Voisin in March 2009. He sent the following information: “Specimen number

258/19129. The stand (‘pedestal’) label stated ‘Huitrier noir. Vieill.Gal.230 / Haematopus niger.Cuv. / Haematopus ater, Vieill. / de la Nouvelle Hollande, / par M.M. Quoy et Gaimard.’ According to Hellmayr & Conover (1948), Vieillot’s description was not diagnostic and he did not distinguish between the Magellanic Blackish (*H. ater*) and Australian (*H. fuliginosus*) Oystercatchers. However, Hellmayr & Conover (1948) were satisfied that this specimen was a Magellanic Oystercatcher, with its ‘very deep and excessively compressed bill’ and it agreed perfectly with specimens from Tierra del Fuego.”

The discussion by Hellmayr & Conover (1948) does not explain why M.M. Quoy and Gaimard’s original scientific name ‘*niger*’ of September 1824 was not given precedence over Vieillot’s suggested scientific name of *H. ater* in his Galerie des Oiseaux of 1825. However, Voisin & Voisin (2012) stated, “The name *Haematopus niger* Quoy & Gaimard, 1824, is preoccupied by *H. niger* Pallas, 1811, now *H. bachmani* Audubon 1838, which is a species of the western coast of North America, hence the precedence given to Vieillot & Oudart’s name.”

Murphy (1936) remarked that this [South American] species ‘occupies the range characterized by the greatest continuous length and the most pronounced climatic diversity.’ He examined specimens collected from the sub-Antarctic (e.g. Cape Horn Island, the Falklands/Malvinas) to the Tropics (Ancón, Peru) and could ‘see no evidence that more than one race was distinguishable despite the almost anomalous nature of the range’.

A hybrid between this species and the Magellanic Oystercatcher *H. leucopodus* was collected in 1973 at 49°S on the estuary at San Julián, Argentina (Jehl 1978). This locality is near the northern limit for Magellanic Oystercatcher, where hybrids between Blackish Oystercatcher and the American



Photo A. Adult Blackish Oystercatcher on rock with pools, West Point Island, November 2006 (photo: Robin Woods).

Oystercatcher *H. palliatus* are not infrequent and the three species occur together. No hybrids between Blackish Oystercatcher and Magellanic Oystercatcher have been reported in the Falklands/Malvinas.

LIFE-HISTORY

Although the Blackish Oystercatcher is larger than the Magellanic Oystercatcher, it is easily overlooked on rocky beaches because the dark plumage gives it excellent camouflage [Photo A]. Adults are sooty-black on head, neck and underparts and dark brown above; the long, heavy and laterally compressed bill is bright red, the iris yellow with a red eye-ring; legs and feet are pale pink and appear incongruously thick. Fledged juveniles are dark brown, flecked with buff above; the bill is blackish, streaked with orange and legs and feet are grey. By about one year, the bill is dark red but blackish for the distal quarter. In flight, the all dark plumage, long bill and long wings with quick shallow wingbeats make it easily recognised. It is usually seen in pairs or small parties [Photo B], though it is sometimes associated with Magellanic Oystercatcher in winter flocks. In the breeding season, it is often active at dusk and can be heard calling until well after dark. The usual flight-note is a loud clear *keep* or *keeyup* with an abrupt ending though displaying pairs or trios may trill loudly in flight or on the ground.

The Blackish Oystercatcher is strongly defensive of its nesting area, both vocally and physically. In the Falklands/Malvinas, adults have been observed chasing predatory birds energetically in flight, including Southern Caracara *Caracara plancus*, Striated Caracara *Phalcoboenus australis*, Variable Hawk *Buteo polyosoma* and also Magellanic Oystercatcher and Crested Duck *Lophonetta specularioides*. An incubating adult will usually walk away silently if a human approaches the nest but if the intruder remains near the eggs the adult and sometimes its mate may

stay nearby and start calling using extremely loud, ear-splitting trills. Injury-feigning has been seen when chicks were present.

HABITAT AND FOOD

Crawshay (1907) commented that in northern Tierra del Fuego it seemed ‘to be entirely a shore form’ in contrast to the Magellanic Oystercatcher which was seen inland in large numbers during spring and summer. Humphrey *et al.* (1970) stated that it “is clearly limited to sea coasts of rock and shingle on Isla Grande”, habitats occurring mostly south of 54°S, on the east just north of Viamonte and on the west, at the southern entrance to Useless Bay. They had little evidence but from other observers’ records concluded that it subsisted on shellfish removed from rocks. In southern Chile, Ricardo Matus (pers. comm.) agreed that it seemed to prefer a rocky environment rather than pebbles or sandy beaches. He felt that this could explain its presence in the fjords, where it also seemed to be more common on the outer than on the inner islands.

In the Falklands, Brooks (1917) stated that it was the ‘less common of the oystercatchers.’ He found no nests and was told it nested about a month later than the Magellanic Oystercatcher. He believed that it fed to some extent on limpets and was more common about pebbly beaches.

Cawell & Hamilton (1961) considered that this was ‘a bird of the rocks’, feeding and nesting among them much more than Magellanic Oystercatcher. In the Falklands, Blackish Oystercatcher is found most frequently on rocky beaches and it also occurs in bays where mussels (*Mytilus* spp.) abound and in sheltered creeks in winter where small parties of mostly immature birds congregate. It is rarely seen on sandy beaches. Pairs seem to remain in or near breeding territories throughout the year.



Photo B. Pair of adult Blackish Oystercatchers prospecting shallow pools at Cat Cove, West Point Island, November 2006 (photo: Robin Woods).

DISTRIBUTION

The Blackish Oystercatcher has an exceptionally wide latitudinal distribution being resident on the western coast of South America from 7°S in Peru along the whole Chilean coast to the Magellanic islands and Cape Horn. It is also resident on the coast of Argentina from Tierra del Fuego and Staten Island to about 43°S. Outside the breeding season occurs as far north as the mouth of the River Plate and probably the coast of Uruguay in winter. An unknown proportion of the breeding birds of the Magellanic region migrate north and east to the continent of South America in winter (Venegas & Jory 1979, Venegas 1994; del Hoyo *et al.* 1996) However, as in the Falklands/Malvinas, it is mainly sedentary.

Crawshay (1907) was resident in northern Tierra del Fuego for almost six months between August 1904 and February 1905. He saw only three Blackish Oystercatchers during that period, a pair near the southern point of Useless Bay (53.8°S 70°W) and a single bird which he collected, on a shingle spit at the entrance to Admiralty Sound (54°S 70°W) on 19 January 1905. Humphrey *et al.* (1970) remarked that it was found in summer along the Beagle Channel, south of Tierra del Fuego and thought that a few could overwinter in the area. Ricardo Matus (pers. comm.) has recorded Blackish Oystercatchers south of Punta Arenas on coasts of the Magellan Straits between February and December and believes that the species is present year-round but there are no records of large numbers, the highest count being six at Magdalena Island, southeast of Punta Arenas and six at Byron Island. Blackish Oystercatchers are rare north of Punta Arenas. Juveniles and immatures have been seen south of Punta Arenas, but no nests or chicks.

In the Falklands/Malvinas, Abbott (1861) made no mention of the abundance of Blackish Oystercatchers although he remarked that the species was resident

throughout the year on East Falkland. Vallentin (in Boyson 1924) was sure that there were more Blackish Oystercatchers in the northward corner of West Falkland than there were Magellanic Oystercatchers. Brooks (1917) noted that this was 'the less common' of the two oystercatcher species and that it was a quiet bird generally; 'I never heard them make any noise whatever, and the other species is seldom quiet.'

Bennett (1926) simply remarked that Blackish Oystercatchers were a common breeding bird in the Falklands, where Cobb (1933) stated that this species had long been known as the Black Curlew. This was in contrast to the local name, Black and White Curlew, used for the Magellanic Oystercatcher which has a long-drawn out wailing cry, closely resembling that of the Curlew *Numenius arquata* in Britain. Cobb (1933) described Blackish Oystercatcher as less numerous than Magellanic Oystercatcher and quieter in its habits and 'having no white about them they would often remain unnoticed while standing on the shore among stones and kelp were it not for their coral-coloured bills and pink legs and feet'

Cawkell & Hamilton (1961) classed it as a well-known resident species, occurring 'all over the Islands' but more common on the eastern side of the Falklands, in smaller numbers than the Magellanic Oystercatcher. Because it is strictly a coastal species, Cawkell & Hamilton (1961) presumably intended to state that it was found along all the coastlines of the Falklands.

SURVIVAL RATES

No data are available; two pulli were banded on Kidney Island, East Falkland in December 1961 and January 1962. There have been no returns or recoveries.



Photo C. Nest of Blackish Oystercatcher with two eggs on Lively Island, taken on 25 November 2007 (photo: Robin Woods).

AGE AT FIRST BREEDING

There is no reliable data available, but it seems likely that first breeding does not occur until birds are at least two years old.

POPULATIONS

Cobb (1933) remarked that the Blackish Oystercatcher was not as numerous as the Magellanic Oystercatcher and was “quieter in ... habits”. From data collected in the Breeding Birds Survey of the Falklands in 1983–1992, the breeding population was estimated to be 4,000–8,000 pairs (Woods & Woods 1997). Assuming each pair translates into three birds (two adults and one pre-breeder) this represents a total population of between 12,000 and 24,000 birds. Analysis of records showed no significant difference between the numbers of 10 km-grid squares occupied on East Falkland and West Falkland. In the same 10-year period the total population of Magellanic Oystercatcher was estimated to be between 21,000 and 39,000 individuals (Woods & Woods 1997). The data in the latest edition of Waterbird Population Estimates (Delany & Scott 2006) are the above figures.

No data are available on intrinsic population growth rates and population viability.

KEY BIOMETRICS

It has not been possible to locate any data other than that summarized and published by Murphy (1936). These specimens were obtained at 17 localities, covering most of the species’ range:

- ❑ Seventeen males: wing, 253–269 (261.5); tail, 93–106 (99.8); exposed culmen, 68–74.5 (71); depth of bill,

14.8–16.3 (15.5); tarsus, 52–57 (54.3); middle toe with claw, 48–53 (50.2)

- ❑ Nine females: wing, 251–280 (267.7); tail, 96–108 (102); exposed culmen, 72–84 (79.5); depth of bill, 15.2–17.8 (16.1); tarsus, 54–59 (57.3); middle toe with claw, 49–54 (51.8) mm.

BREEDING

In the Falklands/Malvinas, Abbott (1861) stated that the breeding season started about one month later than that of Magellanic Oystercatcher and he considered the favoured site to be just above high water mark on a shingle point. Beck (1917) photographed a nest on a beach littered with old tree kelp stems. He noted, ‘The nest ... is scratched in the gravelly beach above high tide, and one can find the two eggs merely by walking along the highwater mark.’ Cobb (1933) noted that it laid two eggs, ‘at the end of October or during November as a rule, though fresh eggs have been found towards the end of January.’ Cobb once found a nest containing four eggs, two of Blackish Oystercatcher and two of Magellanic Oystercatcher and I found a nest with two eggs of Blackish Oystercatcher and one of Magellanic Oystercatcher alongside it, on 28 December 2001. Cawkell & Hamilton (1961) recorded nest sites as usually containing small stones sometimes with a few shell fragments and small twigs. They state that the two eggs are laid in November and December and have also been found in January.

The eggs are grey-buff- or buff-spotted and streaked below and on the surface with yellow-brown and purple-brown [Photo C]. The clutch usually consists of two eggs, and occasionally one. The eggs are laid from late October. Eggs have been found as late as 27 January 1961, at the Lagoon near Bluff Cove; these were probably replacements



Photo D. Adult incubating eggs on nest on a sand beach, Harpoon Island off Fox Island, West Falkland, 20 November 2009 (photo: Robin Woods).

for a lost clutch. The nest is a slight scrape on shingle or drifted dead kelp just above highwater mark. Nests may also be found in natural dips on bedrock often behind a low ridge and containing a few small shells or fragments of dead kelp. Some frequently used sites are surrounded by many empty mussel and limpet shells. Usually sited close to the shore, nests have been found on a rock stack about 10m (35 feet) above sea level and on a shingle bank over 91m (100 yds) from a sandy shore.

In the northern and central regions of Chile, Goodall *et al.* (1951) noted that Blackish Oystercatcher nests in November. It lays a clutch of two or, very occasionally, three eggs.

EGG SIZE

Twenty-seven records of sets containing a total of 76 eggs have been located in collections at five museums, the bulk of them at the Natural History Museum, Tring. They date from 1842 to the early 1960s. R Vallentin (in Boyson, 1924) collected 11 eggs on West Falkland in December 1909 and they measured 60–68 mm long by 42–45 mm in diameter.

Four clutches (a clutch of one egg and three of two) taken by Rollo Beck in 1915 on East Island and Bleaker Island have been measured and recorded individually. Murphy (1936) quoted dimensions of these eggs as 61.2×40.3, 62.9×41.2 and 63.3×42; 63.0×43.1 and 63.3×42.8, 63.7×43.2 and 63.3×43.7 mm. In a clutch of two eggs found on Kidney Island, Falkland Islands, on 19 November 1959 both eggs measured approximately 63×40 mm. Goodall *et al.* (1951) quoted the following dimensions (mm) of eight undated eggs from Chile: Length – mean (SD) 61.5 (3.12) and range 58.0–67.2; Width – 41.8 (1.55) 39.4–43.3.

BREEDING SEASONALITY

There are at least two records from the Falklands/Malvinas of pairs mating, on 15 September 2008 at Carcass Island and on 17 September 2008 on an island in Choisuel Sound, East Falkland. The earliest record of laid eggs is 25 October 1983 and the earliest date for chicks is 8 December 1996 (both Carcass Island). No eggs have been found later than 27 January. [Photo D.]

BREEDING SUCCESS

No data available, but it seems probable, given the number of nests found in the last week of December and four weeks of January, that many earlier clutches or young birds are lost to predators.

SITE FIDELITY

Some nesting sites on Kidney Island (51°37'S 57°46'W) off East Falkland are used annually. On 30 December 1958, a juvenile was found hiding in a hollow behind a beach rock on the southern coast of Kidney Island. On 19 November 1959, there was a nest with two eggs on the same beach rocks and on 27 November 1960, a nest with two eggs was closer to the sea, within 10 m.

Another site on Kidney Island provides evidence of repeated occupation by single nesting pairs. Between 28 November and 4 December 1936, Brian Roberts of the British Grahamland Expedition camped on the island to make observations and collect specimens. He drew a sketch map of the island and marked a stack just off the north-eastern point as 'Oystercatcher Rock'. He had not found the species breeding on earlier visits in 1934 and noted that there

were at least three pairs on Kidney Island in 1936 but again failed to find nests. Cawkell & Hamilton (1961) mentioned a nest on a small cliff edge which is possibly the 'Oystercatcher Rock' site. (E.M. Cawkell left the Falklands in December 1955 and J.E. Hamilton died in April 1957.) I stayed on Kidney Island several times between late 1958 and early 1963 and drew a sketch map of the island in 1960 from an aerial photograph, naming this same stack as 'Oystercatcher Rock', without knowledge of Roberts' visits to the island (Woods 1970). On 25 November 1961 an adult was sitting on a nest at the top of Oystercatcher Rock, almost exactly where a downy chick had been seen in December 1960. On 15 January 1962 an adult was incubating 2 eggs in the same nesting site. There were many limpet and mussel shells around the nest and on ledges below (this stack reaches about 10 m above mean sea level). On 25 November 1996, an adult was incubating a single egg on a ledge about 1 m below the top on the southern side of the ridge, with many shells along the ridge to the west. These records indicate that good nesting sites may be used annually over periods up to at least 60 years.

Site fidelity therefore seems to be high, even though there is no evidence from ringed birds.

MOULT

No data are available.

POPULATIONS: SIZES AND TRENDS

Ricardo Matus (pers. comm.) gave figures supplied by Luis Espinoza from a neotropical waterbird survey of the Chilean coast. Unfortunately there is no precise information on localities, but in the summers of 1995, 1996 and 1998, counts of 15, 46 and 61 Blackish Oystercatchers were made, and in the winters of the same years, 30, 72 and 67 birds were recorded, respectively.

Brian Roberts (1936 unpubl. data) noted in December 1934 that he saw Blackish Oystercatchers quite often during a week on Kidney Island and had observed them feeding on limpets. In late November 1936, he recorded at least three pairs on the island, but was unable to find their nests. Between 26 and 29 December 1960, I located five pairs and a single bird mostly around the western coast of Kidney Island. Between 19 and 25 November 1961, two pairs were located and on 25 December 1961, two more pairs with young were found, making a total of four pairs for that season. Between 24 December 1968 and 13 January 1969, D. Davidson (pers. comm.) found seven pairs; four pairs had one chick and there were three eggs in nests. Finally, during a visit from, 9–14 January 2002, M. Adams and I also recorded at least seven pairs, three of them on parts of the coast where I had not previously seen this species. The small sample of counts over a period of more than 60 years does suggest that the island supported more breeding pairs in 2002 than it did in 1936.

No data are available, on demographic and mechanistic causes of population change

IUCN CONSERVATION STATUS

The Blackish Oystercatcher is classified as being of Least concern with an estimated population of 22,000–120,000

birds and a large range; the estimated extent of occurrence is 190,000 km². Trends have not been quantified, due to data deficiency but they are not believed to approach thresholds of 30% decline in 10 years or three generations (BirdLife International 2008)

THREATS

Given the wide latitudinal distribution of this species, the Falkland/Malvinas birds must represent a very small proportion of the population in the South American region. No information is available about current threats on the coastline of continental South America but any contamination of coastal habitats could have serious effects for the population on the Argentine and Chilean coasts and in the Falklands/Malvinas. Potential threats in continental and Falkland waters would include the possibility of oil spills spreading to rocky shores, either from vessels or perhaps from offshore prospective oil-drilling or oil extraction.

It is worth noting, that there is no commercial shell-fishery operating off Falkland coasts using mechanical or non-mechanical fishing methods and there is no bait digging by fishermen. There is a possibility that eggs may be collected for human consumption or the species hunted for sport or food in some places but there is no danger of this in the Falklands/Malvinas because the species is fully protected under the Conservation of Wildlife and Nature Ordinance of 1999. There are no known threats apart from that posed by natural avian predators of nests or non-flying chicks. There is little direct danger from human disturbance but pairs could lose their eggs or chicks to Striated Caracaras or skuas if a nesting group is disturbed by people approaching too closely.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSERVATION RESEARCH

Shirihai (2002) noted that there were few data on many aspects of the life history of the Blackish Oystercatcher and he also makes the point that it occurs at low density over an extensive range that is little populated by humans.

Suggested priority actions

- Given the apparent lack of variation between populations inhabiting the Falklands/Malvinas and continental coasts from 7°S in Peru to Tierra del Fuego including Chile and Argentina to the River Plate, based on only 26 skins, it seems important to obtain more biometric data from different locations in its extensive range.
- Data collection of this type should not be destructive. Therefore the first priority is basic: people living in these regions could be encouraged to take an interest in the species. This can be developed through enthusiastic leadership from people already involved in ornithological fieldwork in the region. Information that could be collected in this way includes surveys of sections of coastline, counting numbers of birds and recording breeding activity, using the standard nest record card approach.

No recommendations for management are possible given the present lack of relevant information.

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