American Oystercatcher 2019 State and Country Updates

Georgia

Georgia DNR and Partners
Tim Keyes

Between our coastal partners and DNR staff we monitored nesting activity for 116 American Oystercatcher pairs in the state (Figure 1). This is slightly lower than previous years, but may relate more to less intensive monitoring (no shorebird interns available in 2019) leading to fewer confirmed nesting pairs. In 2019 Oystercatchers nested on all undeveloped Islands except Wassaw NWR (nighttime driving for sea turtle patrols may preclude Oystercatcher nesting there), as well as several isolated bars and many shell rakes along the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW).

Of 116 regularly monitored pairs, 61 chicks were confirmed to have hatched in 2019. At least 57 chicks were either confirmed to have fledged or survived to banding age (48 were banded). This is second only to 2018, our record year with 61 chicks fledged (Table 1, Figure 2). Our high productivity in 2019 was largely driven by nest productivity on shell rakes, particularly in St Catherines and St Andrews sounds (Table 2, Figure 3). I suspect that these sites are still benefiting from suppressed predator numbers associated with the 2017 flooding associated with Hurricane Irma. Ongoing predator management on Cumberland Island also improved productivity there.

We continued to witness the reduced success on offshore bars, one of our previously most important nesting habitats. These bars continue to degrade becoming more prone to flooding. Ogeechee Bar did not produce any AMOY chicks in 2019. St Catherines Island Bar is still sub-tidal precluding nesting, as is Grass Island on the Medway River. Pelican Spit produced chicks due to our management actions with Sea Island.

We began the planning process for trying to augment breeding habitat, both offshore bars and shell rakes by increasing their elevation through sand fencing, importing shell and on site shell manipulation. As part of this planning we took detailed elevation measures of all shell rake nests with an RTK. We were able to show that nests under 3 feet NAVD88 did not produce any chicks in 2019. Our best productivity were on rakes between 4-5 feet NAVD88 (Figure 4). This will serve as a target elevation when we build up the elevation of key nesting rakes.

We banded a total of 65 American Oystercatcher during 2019. The majority of these (48) were pre-flighted chicks while 17 birds were captured during two cannon netting efforts, one on Sapelo Island shell rake (31.41335,-81.29836) and another on Oldnor Island (31.56404,-81.21710).

Figure 1: Oystercatcher pairs by year on the Georgia Coast

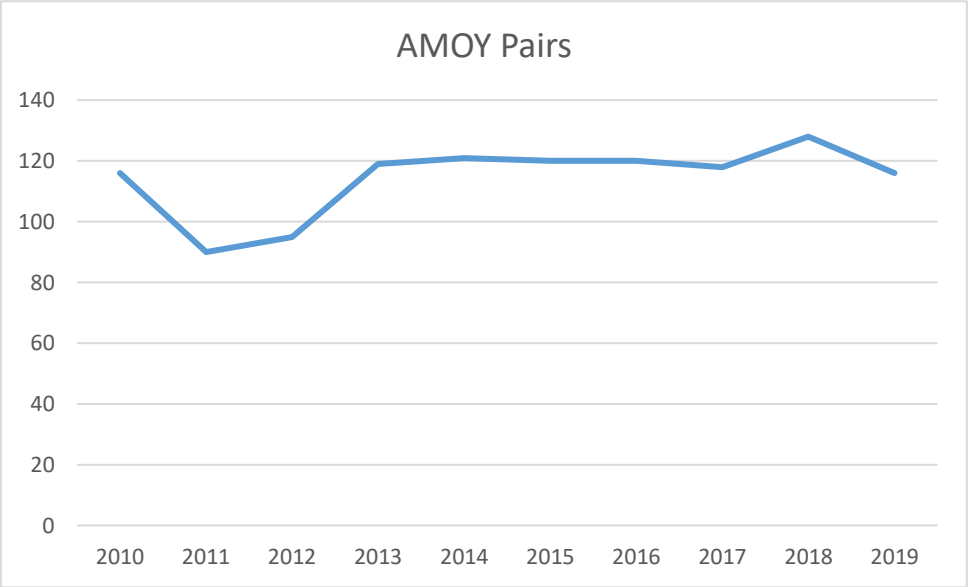


Table 1: Oystercatcher annual productivity

YEAR	AMOY Pairs	Chicks to 25 days	Chicks Banded	Productivity
2010	116	24	22	0.21
2011	90	25	19	0.28
2012	95	16	15	0.16
2013	119	29	26	0.24
2014	121	33	28	0.25
2015	120	44	34	0.31-0.36
2016	120	20	18	0.12-0.16
2017	118	8	9	0.07-0.08
2018	128	61	51	0.48
2019	116	57	48	0.49

Figure 2: Oystercatcher productivity measured as chicks produced per pair annually. Red line is productivity required for population replacement.

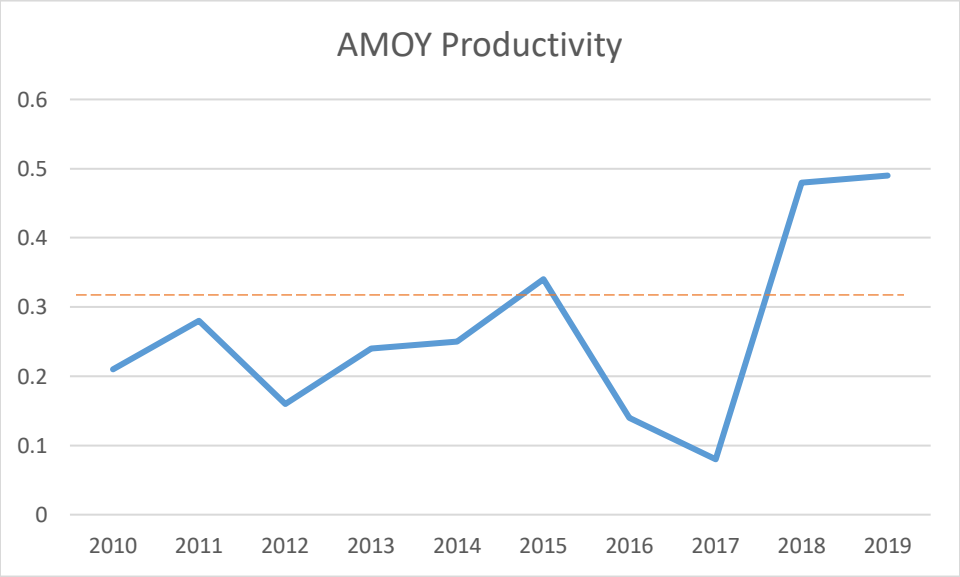


Table 2: 2019 American Oystercatcher pairs and productivity by site.

AREA	AMOY PAIRS	CHICKS HATCHED*	CHICKS FLEDGED*	BANDED	PRODUCT.
LITTLE TYBEE NA	9	2	2	0	0.22
WASSAW SOUND[1]	6	0	0	0	0.00
OSSABAW SOUND[2]	2	0	0	0	0.00
OGEECHEE BAR	3	0	0	0	0.00
OSSABAW ISLAND[3]	3	4	2	2	0.67
KILLKENNY RAKE	1	2	2	2	2.00
ST CATHERINES SOUND[4]	8	10	9	7	1.13
ST CATHERINES ISLAND	2	0	0	0	0.00
SAPELO SOUND[5]	3	2	1	1	0.33
BLACKBEARD ISLAND	1	0	0	0	0.00
WOLF NWR	8	0	0	0	0.00
LITTLE EGG ISLAND BAR	16	10	10	8	0.63
LITTLE ST SIMONS	19	3	3	3	0.16
PELICAN SPIT	3	3	3	3	1.00
ST SIMONS SOUND[6]	1	2	2	2	2.00
ST ANDREWS SOUND[7]	12	13	13	11	1.08
CUMBERLAND SOUND[8]	11	5	5	5	0.45
CUMBERLAND ISLAND	8	5	5	5	0.63
TOTAL	**116**	**61**	**57**	**48**	**0.49**

[1] – Wassaw Sound includes Bull River Rakes, Cabbage Island, Wilmington rakes to Wassaw [2] – Ossabaw Sound includes South Wassaw Rakes, Green Island, Raccoon Key

[3] - Ossabaw Island includes 2 beach front pairs and one shell rake on south end

[4] - St Catherines Sound includes South Ossabaw Rakes, Medway River Rakes, Grass Island, ICW south to Walburg Creek

[5] – Sapelo Sound includes Johnson Creek rakes, Oldnor Island and Dog hammock rakes.

[6] – St Simons Sound include Brunswick Dredge Island, N. Jekyll Rakes, Plantation creek Rakes

[7] – St Andrews Sound includes Raccoon Key, Satilla Marsh Island, Satilla Rakes, Mud River and ICW behind Cumberland south to Cabin Bluff Rakes

[8] - Cumberland Sound includes Stafford Island, Kings Bay Rakes, and South Bank of St Mary's River

*- chick count and fledge count are confirmed numbers, likely lower than actual based on limited surveying of some locations with early chick loss possible.

Figure 3: Annual Oystercatcher pairs and productivity by location.

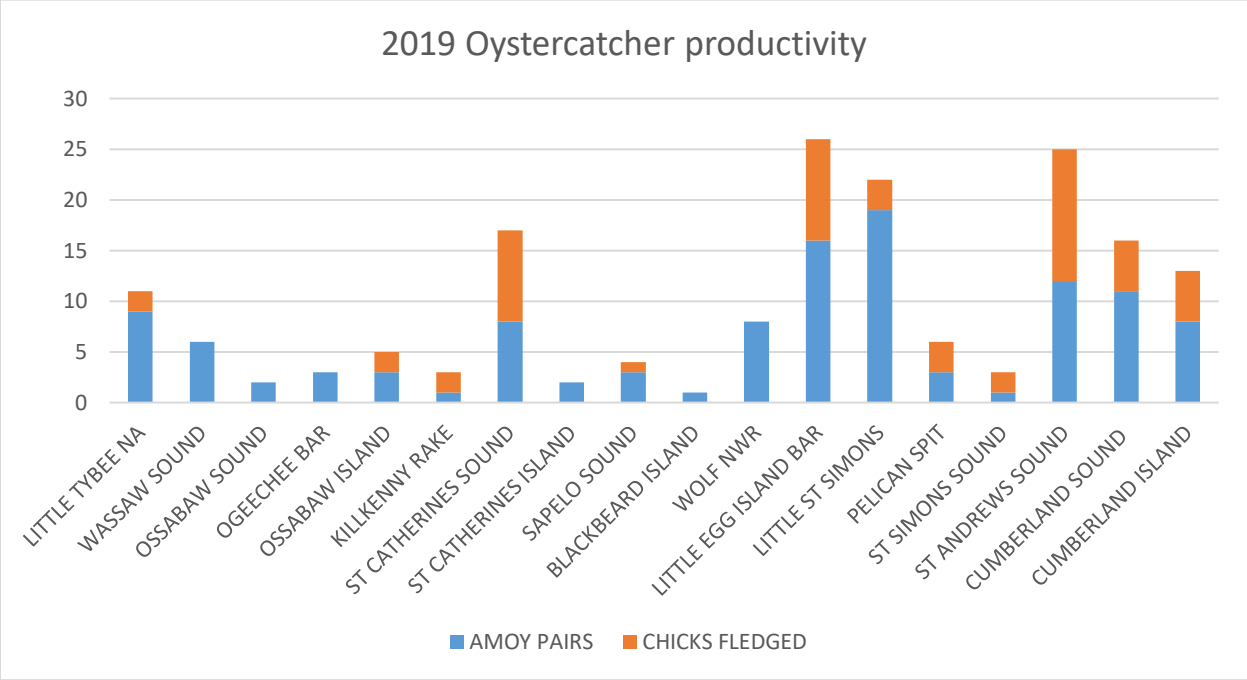
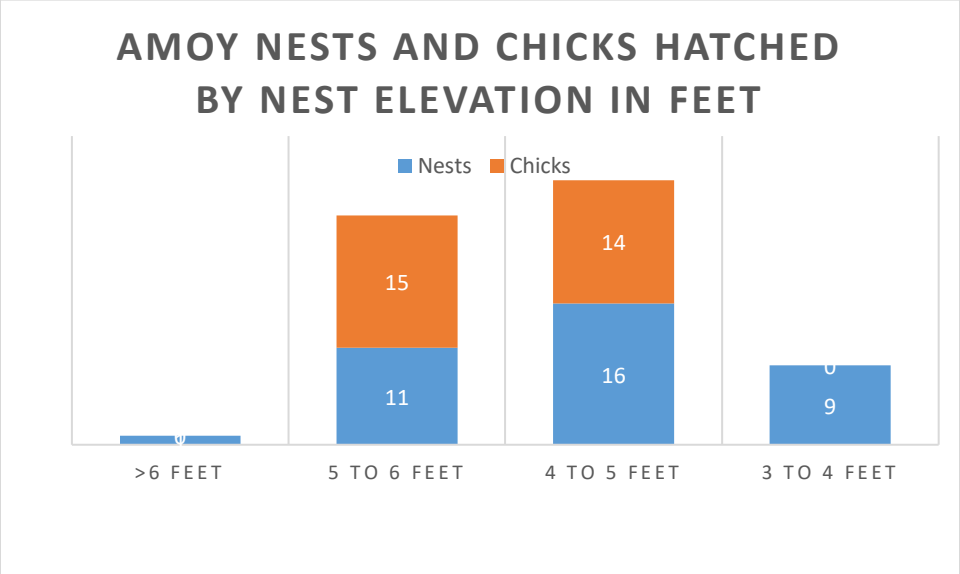


Figure 4: Nest productivity for AMOY nests on shell rakes by elevation.



Manomet
Abby Sterling

Manomet (me) is working with Audubon, Virginia Tech, and GA DNR to implement monitoring and disturbance reduction at four public beaches in Georgia. Of the four, one is an important roost site of AMOY in the winter (Ft Pulaski) and the others have the potential to serve as nesting locations. We are focusing on dog-walking behavior shifts and working to implement a pilot study of a disturbance reduction campaign using community based social marketing, and working on applying lessons learned from the larger Atlantic Flyway project that Virginia Tech and Audubon have been working on.

We have also begun a two-year project to develop an educational and marketable certification program to engage with ecotourism and charter boat companies to reduce disturbance in remote areas of the Georgia coast. This is a partnership with UGA Marine Extension and Sea Grant, and GA DNR. We just started in October and have received a lot of enthusiasm and buy-in already. We hope this project will protect roost sites and nest sites from recreational disturbance and dogs.