

## American Oystercatcher 2019 State and Country Updates

### New Jersey

#### Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey

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Through various partners, all known pairs of American Oystercatcher nesting on the Atlantic Coast barrier island/inlet sandy beaches of New Jersey from Sandy Hook to Cape May Point, at 45 sites in total, were monitored and managed in 2019. Monitoring (3-7 times a week) was conducted to track both abundance and reproductive success, including nest success/hatch rates, fledging rates, and causes of nest loss. All of the breeding pairs were managed for human disturbance, primarily through the use of fencing and signage to minimize disturbance of nesting areas, but some sites were entirely closed to the public use during the breeding season. American Oystercatcher conservation was coordinated on a statewide basis by the state's Endangered and Nongame Species Program (part of the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife) and the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey. Together they worked especially close with local coastal municipalities to try to minimize impacts of their beach management practices and activities on nesting American oystercatchers. Predator management was conducted at a number of breeding sites, although effort varied considerably by site. In many cases it was done primarily for other target shorebird species (i.e. Piping Plover), however, it also benefitted American oystercatchers.

The population of American Oystercatchers using sandy beach habitat along the Atlantic Coast of New Jersey in 2019 was 139 pairs, a notable increase from 2018 (111 pairs) but about on par with the 2017 abundance estimate (136 pairs). The drop in pairs in 2018 had been unexpected as the trend over the past 17 years that monitoring has been conducted in New Jersey has generally been steadily upwards. The current population, even with some minor inconsistencies in monitoring intensity and effort over that period, is now nearly 2.5 times the number of pairs recorded in 2003 (53 pairs), the first year of monitoring. As to the sharp decrease reported in 2018, it was largely unexplained at the time, however most of the loss of pairs was at Sandy Hook (Gateway National Recreation Area). The number of pairs recorded there this year is back to the 2017 level, so the drop in 2018 may have been a function of monitoring effort.

For the 139 "beach nesting" breeding pairs of American Oystercatcher in New Jersey in 2019, pair hatch success (pairs that hatched at least one chick) was 41%, with 0.50 chicks fledged per pair, which is on par with the fledgling recovery target established in the NFWF American Oystercatcher Business Plan. (Please note that all abundance and reproductive success results reported here are still preliminary, pending final review.)

As has been indicated in past year's summaries and discussions, a large percent of the Oystercatchers in New Jersey breed on marsh island habitat, and more recently smaller numbers on Delaware Bay beaches, as well as rooftops. Those populations are not regularly monitored, therefore the results indicated in this report do not represent a statewide breeding estimate. A small number of breeding American Oystercatchers were monitored on marsh island habitat in 2019, primarily by The Wetlands Institute in the Hereford Inlet complex as part of monitoring and research of sites where beneficially used dredged material was utilized to create nesting habitat for oystercatchers and other colonial nesters (BLSK, COTE, LETE).

New Jersey continued its revitalized banding project in 2019, with 28 individual oystercatchers, including 5 adults and 23 juveniles, being banded using an orange-colored “pyramid” band scheme. Banding occurred at 12 sites and was conducted separately by the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey (in association with the state Endangered and Nongame Species Program) and The Wetlands Institute. Band IDs (resights) were recorded at all sites being monitoring for breeding birds as part of normal monitoring procedures, as well as some incidental observations at other sites, and have been or will be reported to the AMOY Working Group database.

Aside from the typical challenges faced with American Oystercatcher management, fishing line entanglements are an increasing problem in New Jersey. Attempting to trap the birds and remove the fishing line has required additional, sometimes significant, time and effort. These entangled birds cannot easily be ignored as they are highly visible to (and loved by) the public, which adds to the pressure to address the entanglements. New Jersey is also noting more breeding pairs on some of its most highly recreated beaches, again taxing available resources. In general, we are seeing a steady increase in the number of sites where breeding occurs on our Atlantic Coast beach sites. It is not clear whether this increase is a function of higher reproductive success since more intensive management began or a shift of pairs that previously nested on marsh islands; that cannot be determined without a true statewide monitoring effort, across all habitats, and/or a more comprehensive banding effort.