

American Oystercatcher 2019 State and Country Updates

Rhode Island

Maureen Durkin, Wildlife Biologist, Rhode Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex
Shilo K. Felton, Principal Wildlife Biologist, Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife

American Oystercatchers (AMOY) nest along Rhode Island's sandy beaches southwest of Narragansett Bay, on islands within Narragansett Bay, and along the northwest coast of Block Island (13 miles south of Rhode Island's mainland) (Figure 1).

Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RI DEM), Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW), has documented the occurrence of AMOY breeding pairs/territories across the state annually since 1976, as part of its annual colonial waterbird survey (Figure 2). Most of the state's breeding population nest on natural islands within Narragansett Bay, sites for which no productivity records occur.

Staff from Rhode Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex began monitoring AMOY productivity in southern Rhode Island in 2009 (Figure 3), as part of the Piping Plover Preservation state wildlife grant issued by Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RI DEM). Up to 10 AMOY pairs nest on Sandy Point Island, which is managed by USFWS through a lease agreement with Avalonia Land Conservancy. Block Island National Wildlife Refuge has also had 1-4 pairs of AMOY in recent years, which USFWS monitors with the help of local volunteers due to access issues. USFWS monitors 1-2 pairs on the privately owned Napatree Point and Quonochontaug Beach through agreements with landowners. USFWS begins surveying for AMOY and pre-posting historic nesting areas at these sites in late March to early April. We locate and mark the locations of all nests, and place additional symbolic fencing where needed. Depending on site accessibility, we check each nest 1-3x per week until hatch or fail and attempt to determine cause of failure if possible. After hatch, we attempt to observe chicks 1-3x per week until fledge or fail. Our staff also interacts with visitors at nesting beaches to provide information and reduce disturbance where possible and enforces a dog prohibition on Sandy Point Island. We also re-sight, record, and report AMOY bands for breeding and migrating individuals at all our sites. In particular, the mussel beds at Napatree Point are an important stopover and staging site for AMOY, with upwards of 30-40 individuals gathering to feed in late summer and early fall.

Moving forward, RI DFW and Rhode Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex plan to partner in a banding program to better document juvenile recruitment and adult retention within Rhode Island, likely starting with banding chicks on Sandy Point. RI DFW hopes to increase its monitoring coverage within Narragansett Bay in future years in order to better document productivity for most of the state's breeding population. Additionally, while Block Island has historically supported up to five pairs, in 2019 it was down to a single breeding pair. USFWS plans to evaluate potential management actions and prioritize AMOY management in order to re-establish or increase pair numbers in upcoming years.

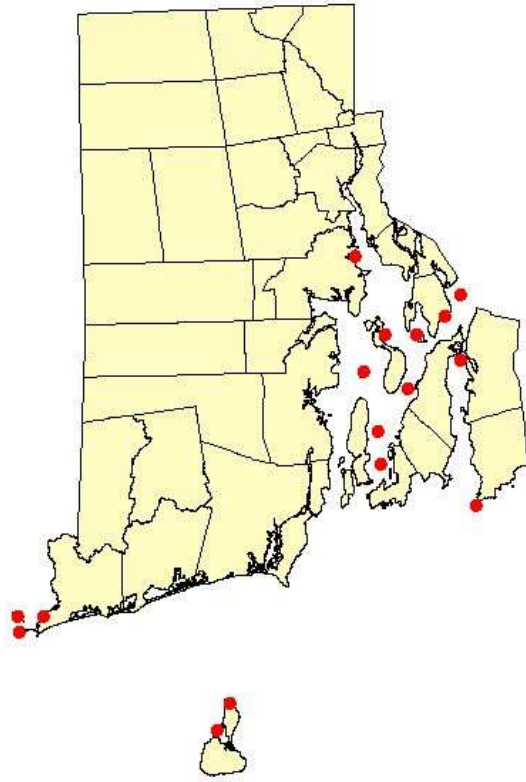


Figure 1. American Oystercatcher nesting pair/territory locations, based on a survey in 2010.

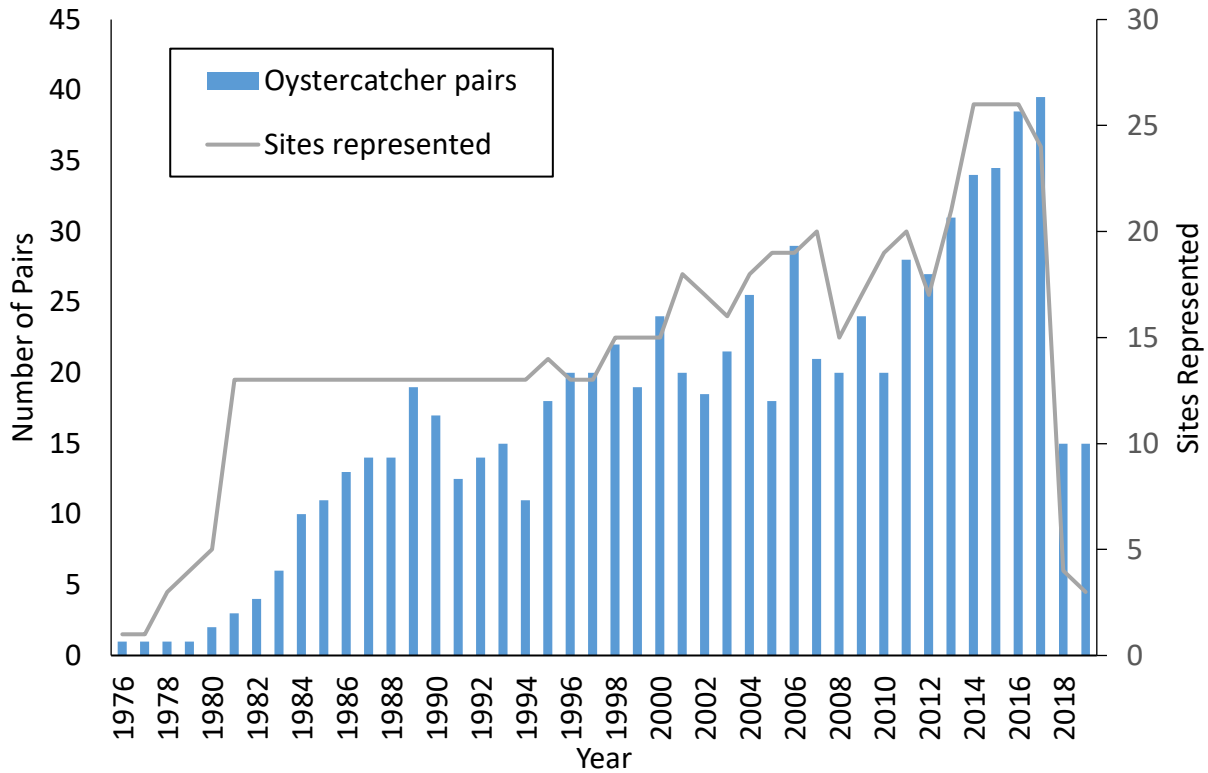


Figure 2. Estimated number of American Oystercatcher pairs/territories in Rhode Island. Numbers before 2009 are from annual waterbird surveys alone. Numbers from 2009-2019 include pairs monitored by USFWS. Numbers from 2018-2019 include only pairs monitored by USFWS, as Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife has not yet compiled survey results from these years.

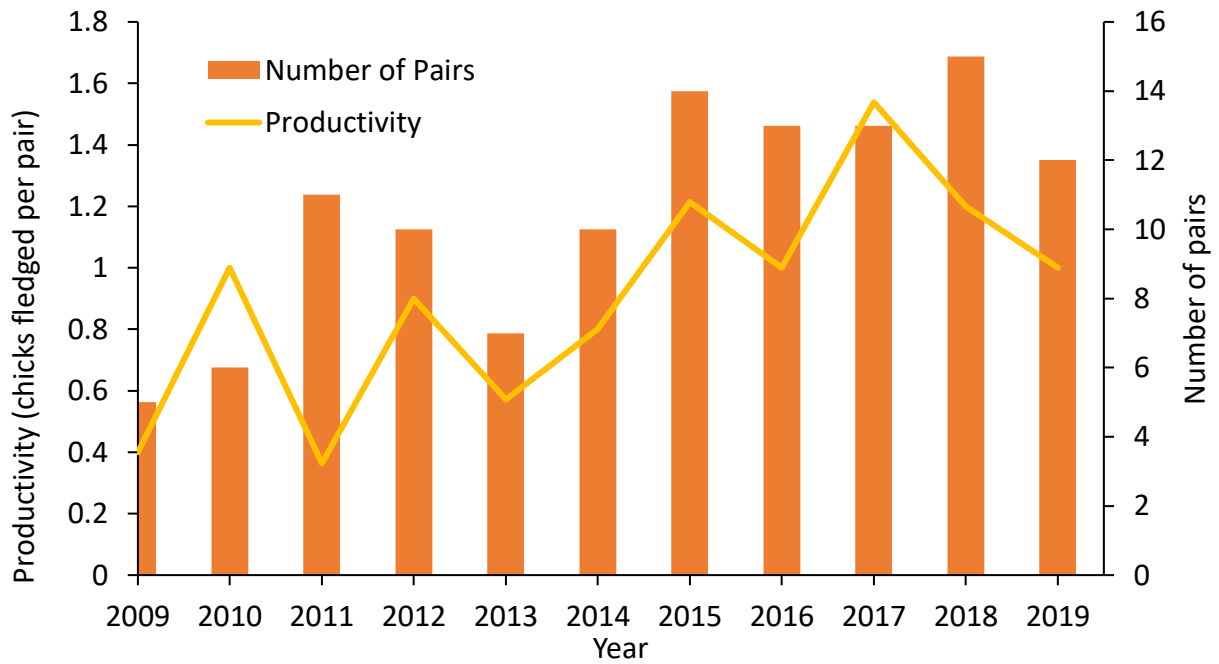


Figure 3. American Oystercatcher productivity for pairs nesting on sites monitored and managed by USFWS, Rhode Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex.