

## American Oystercatcher 2019 State and Country Updates

### Texas

#### Texas Gulf Coast Bird Observatory

*Sue Heath*

#### Nest Monitoring

The Gulf Coast Bird Observatory continued to monitor nesting oystercatchers in 2019. From January 31 through June 28, we spent 38 days in the field. Volunteers provided an additional 381 hours of time helping with equipment, photographing birds and monitoring nests.

In 2019, we located 68 pairs on the Upper Texas Coast and monitored 60 of them on a weekly basis. 44 pairs produced 72 nesting attempts. Only six chicks fledged with our lowest productivity in nine years of monitoring at .14. This year we had many high tide events that overwashed nests and several severe thunderstorms with hail which destroyed the bulk of the nests. While our nesting season usually extends into July, this year many pairs gave up in mid-May. Two pairs made a heroic effort to fledge their chicks which took over 60 days likely due to reduced food supplies from the high tides. Both chicks did eventually fledge however.

#### Restoration Projects

In Texas oystercatchers nest almost exclusively on small bay islands. We have only found two pairs nesting on the beach and they have never been successful likely due to mammalian predation. Because of regulations on the use of dredge spoil, the small islands supporting oystercatcher nesting are not being replenished and they are slowly (and sometimes not so slowly) washing away. The number of nesting pairs is declining as a result because there is simply not enough nesting habitat.

Working with partners we have attempted several restoration efforts. First Master Naturalists filled in an area on a breakwater with shell hoping to provide nesting habitat in 2018. A pair of 3 year olds (they were both banded as chicks) defended this area but never laid a nest. Although the shell stayed in place for quite a while, by the end of the nesting season, high tides had washed it away and it was no longer suitable for nesting.

The Galveston Bay Foundation also created some shell nesting pads on a breakwater they were constructing and built them up higher than the breakwater but no birds used them in 2018 despite many pairs being displaced by island erosion nearby.

We are considering constructing nesting platforms in areas where small nesting islands have eroded away but the permitting process is onerous so these can only be placed in areas with private ownership which is very limiting.

The Galveston Bay Foundation, Ducks Unlimited, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory and USFWS have been working for some time on an island and intertidal reef restoration project in Jones Bay near the I-45 bridge to Galveston which formerly had four small nesting islands that hosted six pairs of birds. There are now only two pairs of birds nesting in this area due to island erosion. We plan to restore four small islands for nesting and create intertidal reef nearby. All environmental surveys are completed and we are working on island and reef restoration design. We just recently learned we received funding for the construction phase of this project and hope to begin island construction following the 2020 nesting

season. Subsequently to construction, we will monitor island and reef use by oystercatchers for a minimum of three years. If these prove successful we hope to extend this process to other areas along the coast.

### Fishing Line Entanglements

Fishing line entanglements continue to be an issue for oystercatchers in Texas. We hadn't had an entangled bird in quite a few years and then this year there was an explosion. One bird was reported at Oyster Lake in Matagorda County, one on Matagorda Beach in Matagorda County and six at the Texas City Dike in Galveston County. The one from Oyster Lake (a banded bird) turned up on Matagorda Beach about a month later missing a foot. It seemed to be doing ok. I was able to catch the one Matagorda Beach and two of the ones at the Texas City Dike and remove the fishing line. Fortunately the line had not cut through the skin on any of the birds and we were able to release them all without a stint in rehab. Of the other four, two managed to escape several trapping attempts and the other two disappeared. Subsequent to the reporting of six entangled birds on the Texas City Dike we arranged a cleanup and 20 volunteers spent four hours doing nothing but picking up discarded fishing line. Although there are fishing line disposal tubes there, they aren't being used. The Houston Zoo is engaging in an education program at this location due to begin in the next few months. They will add many more disposal tubes and educate the public about the perils to birds of discarded fishing line. We are also working the American Bird Conservancy on a project to put together some public service announcements about how fishing line causes wildlife entanglements.