

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER

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2026

Band Resighting  
**GUIDANCE**

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A PRODUCT OF THE  
AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER  
WORKING GROUP



# From the Working Group

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American Oystercatcher Orange YF3 and chick. Ray Hennessy

## **THANK YOU FOR REPORTING BANDED AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHERS**

This guide was developed by the American Oystercatcher Working Group to assist biologists, volunteers, and citizen scientists to accurately read and report banded American Oystercatchers. Band resighting helps the Working Group learn about oystercatchers' movements, demographics, and habitat requirements so we can implement management actions on the ground. Your efforts contribute to American Oystercatcher conservation across their range.

# Reading & Reporting Bands

Over 8,500 American Oystercatchers have been banded in the U.S. since 1999. Banding helps researchers learn about demographics, movement, and habitat requirements. In turn, this information can assist in identifying threats and limiting factors that managers and conservationists can work to address.

The Working Group has established a standardized banding scheme, which facilitates band resighting because band colors and codes are consistent across banding programs and observers can learn what to expect. It has evolved through several iterations since the early 2000s. Currently, each oystercatcher receives duplicate field readable bands on its upper legs. This guide will familiarize observers with all possible band types, with an emphasis on the current banding scheme.

The Working Group maintains the American Oystercatcher Band Database to provide a mechanism for researchers to efficiently enter and search records of banded American Oystercatchers. Members of the public can report bands to the Band Database ([www.amoywg.org](http://www.amoywg.org)). So far, there are over 122,000 resights in the database. Data is shared with the Bird Banding Lab and through partners under a data sharing agreement.



Biologist banding American Oystercatchers at Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge. USFWS

**Report Form**

**Report a Banded Bird**

**Location Information**

State:

**Reporting Instructions**

Please fill out as much information about your bird as possible. Required fields are in boldface. As you complete form fields, more fields will appear, and you will be able to upload a photo or photos after you submit your record.

If you are unsure of how to read a band or band code—for example, you see an underlined letter or number or a dot between the characters—visit the pages about identifying banded oystercatchers and reading band codes for assistance.

If you could not confirm the presence or absence of a band or a code from any of the leg locations enter "Unknown" and do not assume that no band was present. Even partial information can be useful!

If you took photos of the bird, please consider submitting them with your record. If you could not read the band code or identify the band color, we can often help if you submit the record anyway and attach a photo.

If you have any questions about what to enter in the fields, click the orange help buttons.

If you still have questions, or need any other assistance, contact the administrator at [ledson@audubon.org](mailto:ledson@audubon.org).

A project of:

**American OYSTERCATCHER WORKING GROUP**

Report your oystercatcher using the [online report form](#) or the QR code above. If you have seen a banded American Oystercatcher outside of the United States, please report it by emailing the date and location seen, observers' names, flock size, coordinates (decimal degrees preferred), and photos of the birds (if there are any) to [Lindsay Addison](mailto:Lindsay.Addison).



American Oystercatcher captured as an adult and banded in Cape May in 2024. NJ; Photo by Richard George, Creative Commons



American Oystercatcher chick freshly banded in 2018 in Virginia. Photo by Pam Denmon



American Oystercatcher with triangle code. Photo by Craig Daniels

## SPOTTING A BANDED BIRD

Before you can read a band, you must first find one. Scrutinize the legs of any oystercatchers that you see. Bands may look like a flash of color or a bump on a leg. If you think you see something on an oystercatcher's legs, you could be looking at a band. If you have binoculars, a camera with a zoom lens, or a spotting scope—and can approach without disturbing the birds—try to get a good look. Take photos or notes to help you record what you are seeing.

## BAND LOCATION

Bands can be placed on any of four locations on the legs of American Oystercatchers: upper left, lower left, upper right, and lower right. When determining band position, record the bird's left and right, not yours.

If you could not see one of the locations on the bird's legs, do not assume there was no band. Birds may stand on one leg, stand in water, or fluff their belly feathers, all of which can hide bands. Report an unseen band location on the leg as "unknown."



Being leggy comes in handy for bird banders and the people resighting them.



Tucked up legs can make it tricky to accurately resight birds. Photo by Pam Denmon



The Bird Banding Lab requires metal bands in most instances on any banded bird. Red Y76 was banded as a chick in 2019 in Florida. Different types of pliers are used to place bands onto the legs. Some are specifically made for banding birds. Photo by Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission

## TYPES OF BANDS

Oystercatcher bands vary by the material they are made out of and their shape.

## MATERIALS: METAL & PLASTIC

Almost every banded bird receives a metal band issued by the Bird Banding Lab. These bands are most commonly placed on the lower legs of oystercatchers and will be smaller than other bands. Metal bands are engraved with a unique eight- or nine-digit number, but are not intended to be read except when the bird is recaptured or found dead. However, it is important to note the metal band location when possible.

Almost every banded oystercatcher is given plastic field readable bands. The plastic is especially durable, so the oystercatchers carry them for their entire lives. The purpose of these bands is to be “field readable,” which means that they are engraved with a two- or three-character code (letters, numbers, or a combination of both) that is legible when an oystercatcher is viewed with a spotting scope or photographed with a telephoto lens. Sometimes, it’s possible to read a field readable code with binoculars. When combined with the band color, the field readable code uniquely identifies the oystercatcher.

Early oystercatcher banding schemes included some “plain” plastic bands. These are not field readable, meaning they do not have any codes engraved on them. A few oystercatchers with them are still alive, but they are rare. These bands are small, about the size of metal bands, and less conspicuous than field readable bands.

## SHAPES: ROUND BANDS & FLAGS

Most plastic bands are simple round bracelets, but some have a tab that sticks out from the ring around the bird's leg. These are called "flags." Most oystercatcher flags have engraved codes on them. Some very old banding schemes included flags without codes, but none of those remain in the wild today. Oystercatchers with flags will have a flag on one upper leg and a round band on the other, as in the picture below left.



Flags are no longer in use, but birds with them are still alive, like Dark Green CEA which has a flag on its upper right leg. Flags were used as an experimental option when the Working Group started switching from two-to three-character codes.

## COLOR OF BANDS

As part of the Working Group's standardized banding protocol, groups of states have been assigned different colors for their plastic field readable bands. For example, all oystercatchers banded in Virginia and Maryland receive black field readable bands.

Band colors can sometimes be confused, either because the colors themselves are similar, because of poor lighting, or both. If you are uncertain, pay close attention to other details as well, in case they can help to identify the bird. If you have a camera, take a photo for reference.

## METAL BANDS

Though the focus is naturally on the larger, more colorful bands, the presence and location of the metal band is important to note when possible. For example, two birds with similar codes may have metal bands on opposite legs, which can help confirm which bird was seen. And, it's of interest to note if a bird has lost its metal band—this is rare, but it has been documented.



This banding scheme hasn't been in use since the early 2000s. However, it illustrates all three types of bands: the field readable band on the upper right leg; the plain black, green, and orange plastic bands, and the metal band sitting above the black band.

# Band Gallery



Yellow CH3 triangle banded in MA. Yellow 3T horizontal banded in CT.  
Yellow is used in New England (CT, RI, MA, NH, ME).

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Orange A59 triangle banded in NJ. Orange 38 horizontal banded in NJ.  
Orange is used in NJ and NY.

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Black 2A horizontal banded in VA. Black ANK triangle banded in MD.  
Black is used in VA and MD.

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Dark Green E3A triangle banded in NC. Dark Green FAJ triangle banded in DE.  
Dark Green is used in NC and DE.

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# Band Gallery



Dark Blue AE horizontal banded in SC. Dark Blue AA3 triangle banded in AL.  
Dark blue is used in SC and AL.

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Red HH horizontal banded in GA. Red U89 triangle banded in FL.  
Red is used in GA and FL.

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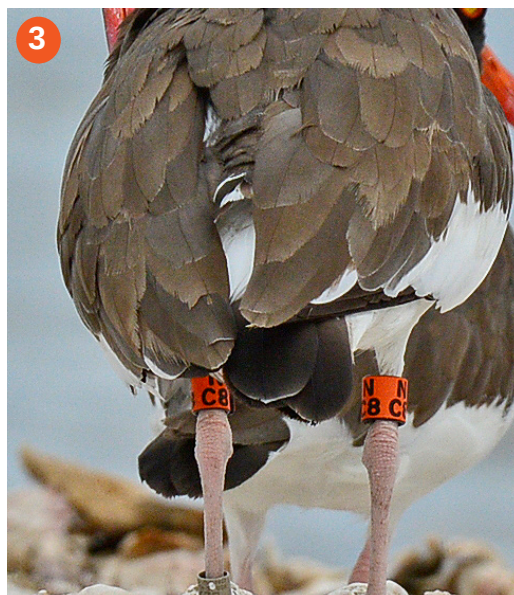
Maroon JC horizontal banded in TX. Maroon W8W triangle banded in TX.  
Maroon is used in TX

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## CHALLENGING BAND COLORS

Generally, colors should be apparent. However, some colors are similar, and color fading due to sunlight exposure may complicate things. For example, dark blue and black may appear similar in some lighting conditions. Orange bands come in several shades, and some observers mistake them for red or yellow. One trick is to refer to the text color; if the text is white, the color will never be orange or yellow.

Maroon and red can look similar, but since Texas birds, which get maroon bands, are mostly resident, this has not been a major issue. However, a handful of reports of a maroon band have occurred in the Florida Panhandle, so northern Gulf resighters should be aware of maroon bands in case they encounter one. Both red and maroon bands have white characters.



Why are orange bands different colors? The faded orange bands were from what turned out to be a bad batch of band material. The others came from different manufacturers, resulting in different shades of orange being made.

1. Some early orange bands faded shortly after banding and now appear the color of cantaloupe. These are referred to as "faded orange." The specific bands that had this problem are known and their capture records include a note about the fading.
2. These orange bands were put out in New Jersey. They are a pumpkin shade.
3. These orange bands were put out in New York. They are a very bright shade of orange.
4. These orange bands were also put out in New Jersey, but they came from a slightly different batch of orange material.

## HOW TO READ BAND CODES

There are two elements to reading an oystercatcher band code: The code's orientation and the code itself. To make it easier to see the code, nearly all oystercatchers are given two duplicate field readable bands, one on each upper leg, so if part of a code is not visible on one band, it may be visible on the other. A few oystercatchers have lost one of their field readable bands, but they are the occasional exception.

### CODE ORIENTATION

Code orientation refers to the orientation of the entire code, not the individual letters. Band codes that are read left to right are oriented horizontally (band Black 30 below). Bands that are read up and down are oriented vertically. The characters on some vertical bands are stacked upright on top of one another (Red 03 below) while on other bands the characters are rotated 90 degrees (Black A9).

Because some codes occur horizontally and vertically on the same color, you must record not only the code but also the orientation in all cases.

Starting in 2013, the Working Group began to transition to three-character bands. These bands are read top to bottom, left to right. The orientation of these bands is referred to as "triangle" (Red AF4 below). In the 2020s, it has become the most commonly seen orientation, but all types will continue to be possible for years to come, as American Oystercatchers are long-lived birds.



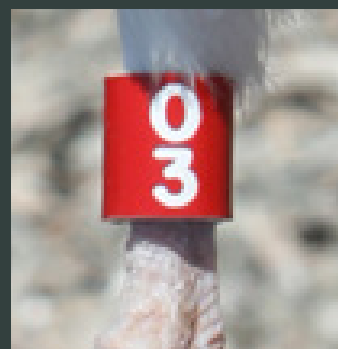
Using cameras and scopes to read bird bands is generally ethical if done from a distance with long lenses, avoiding playback or baiting, respecting sensitive species/nesting areas, and following location rules. It is important that you take care not to stress the bird, interrupt vital activities (foraging, nesting, mating), expose it to predators, or violate regulations. A good rule of thumb is if you cause a bird to change its behavior, you are too close. Review the [Guide to Ethical Photography webpage](#) for some great tips on ethical observations.



Example of horizontal orientation



Example of vertical orientation



Another example of vertical orientation



Example of triangle orientation

Some oystercatchers have a horizontal code on a flag on one leg and a vertical code on a round band on the other leg. The orientation of these bands should be reported as “both” since one band is read vertically and one is read horizontally.

## CHARACTER ORDER

Oystercatcher codes are two or three characters long and can be letters, numbers, or a combination of both. The codes repeat around the bands, twice for horizontal codes and three times for vertical and triangle codes. This allows the code to be seen from any angle, but can lead to confusion over which character comes first when reading horizontal or triangle codes.

Three-character triangle codes are read top to bottom then left to right. You can always tell which is the second character in a triangle code by looking to see which of the bottom two characters is on the left side of the top character.



Dark Green CC3 shows a horizontal code on a flag on one leg and a vertical code on a band on the other leg. Thus, its orientation should be reported as “both.”



The code in this photo is CFU because the F is to the left of the C and the U is to the right.



The code in this photo is CJ. The underline beneath the C indicates it is the first character.



The code in this photo is R6. The code should be read starting from the right of the dot.

## CODE DELINEATORS

Most horizontal codes use a symbol to delineate which character should be read first. Delineators can be underlines or dots.

An underline indicates that the underlined letter or number is the first character (see the middle photo above). Underlines are the most commonly used delineator.

In the photo to the right, the dot separates the replicated codes and shows that the E is the first element of the code, even though the characters on the band on the bird's right leg appear to be in the order “8E.”



Red E8 can appear to look like 8E.

## OBSERVING SEAMS & SPACING

The very earliest field readable bands did not use delineators at all. When there is no dot or underline, observers must rely on the seam of the band or the spacing of the characters to separate the repetitions of the code and read the characters in the correct order.

If there is no delineator, look for the seam of the band and read from right of the seam. The photos below show a green band inscribed with the code "N5." The photo on the left shows the code visible in the correct order. The photo in the center shows the band turned so the code appears backward as "5N." The dot in the center separates the characters and shows that the N is the first element of the code. The seam that separates the characters correctly is also visible.

When the seam is not visible, the spacing of the characters also indicates the correct order to read them. The wider gap is where the dot would be, so read to the right of the wider space between characters.



Three different views of the same band, but in each case the code can be read correctly based on the dot, the seam, and the spacing between the characters.



The band on the right leg looks like "V5", but if you look closely you will see the band seam which indicates a separation between the codes. When the seam is not visible, the **spacing of the characters** also indicates the correct order to read them, as can be seen on the left band.



Here are two more examples. Even if there were no underlines to indicate that the Y in "YX" and the T in "TE" are the first characters, you can see that the spacing between the letters is different.

## METAL BAND CODES

Metal band codes are not intended to be read in the field, but if a photograph captures some of the digits, they can be noted in the comments. Otherwise, just record the location of the metal band.

## READ ONLY WHAT YOU SEE

As you start reading oystercatcher band codes, make sure that you do not make assumptions and only report what you can see. For example, when looking at orange KC in the photo, if you just looked at the band on the bird's upper right leg, you wouldn't know if the underlined character is a K or an X. But, on the other band, it's clearly a K. Remember to think about what you don't know in order to avoid making assumptions.



Reading band codes can be tricky. Don't make assumptions and take care to look for seams, underlines, and any other characters to help you get it right.

## PHOTOS CAN HELP

All of these details are sometimes difficult to discern in the field, but it is usually possible to do so with careful observation. Photos of banded oystercatchers can be very useful in determining the band color, code, and location of the band on the leg. You can upload photos of your bird when you report a band and get help interpreting them.

## RARELY SEEN BANDS

Very early oystercatcher band schemes called for two bands to share the same location. There is a slight chance of observing one of those birds, even 20 years later. In such a case, the two bands are read top to bottom. Here we would have metal/yellow, meaning metal (the silvery band) is above the yellow one.



This bird was banded as a chick with a metal band placed over a plastic yellow band on its lower right leg. This type of banding scheme was used very early in the Working Group's history and abandoned in favor of the field readable bands by 2004.

# Have Questions?

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## CONTACT

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## LISTSERV

Email: [tsimons@ncsu.edu](mailto:tsimons@ncsu.edu) to  
request to be added

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## WEB

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We Hope  
This Guide  
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Helpful!