AFRICAN OYSTERCATCHER (AFRICAN BLACK OYSTERCATCHER) | *Haematopus moquini*

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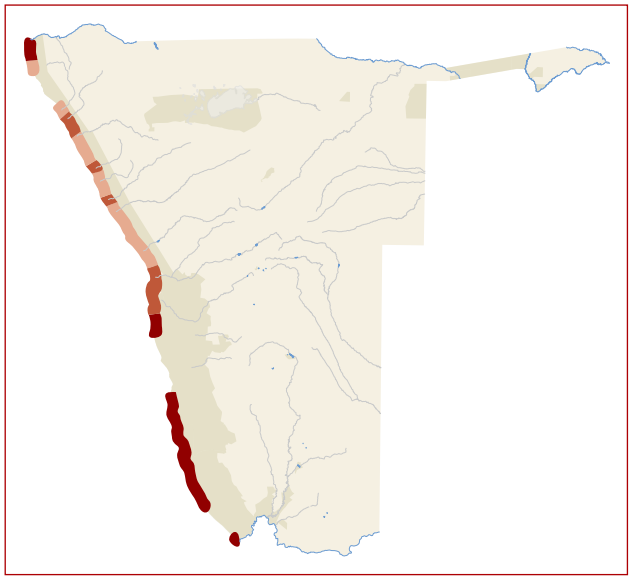
Conservation Status:	Near Threatened
Southern African Range:	Coastal Namibia, South Africa
Area of Occupancy:	16,000 km^2
Population Estimate:	2,860 individuals
Population Trend:	Stable to increasing
Habitat:	Rocky and sandy coastal shores, islands, bays and lagoons
Threats:	Human disturbance at islands, human and vehicle disturbance at nurseries

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

The African Oystercatcher has a breeding range extending from just north of Lüderitz on the southern Namibian coast to Port Edward, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (Hockey 2005c). Vagrants occur as far north as Lobito, Angola (Hockey 1983a) and about 35 birds occur at Baia dos Tigres, Angola (Dean *et al.* 2002, Simmons *et al*. 2006b). Its range extends eastwards as far as Inhaca Island, Mozambique (de Boer & Bento 1999). A large proportion of the population is found on some of the 18 islands and rocks that occur just off south-west Namibia (Table 2.2). An estimated 370 pairs of oystercatchers breed in a 50 km stretch between Lüderitz Bay and Possession Island and constitute the core breeding area in Namibia (Hockey 1982, Kemper *et al*. 2007b, MFMR, J Kemper unpubl. data). The most important of these islands is Possession Island with up to 199 breeding pairs (MFMR unpubl. data). Smaller numbers of breeding pairs have been recorded at localities farther south, but are likely to be underestimates, given that no concerted nest searches have been done during the breeding season at these localities. Few oystercatchers breed along the mainland, where they are likely to be subjected to disturbance and predation by jackals (RE Simmons unpubl. data). Extralimital breeding attempts north of Lüderitz, at the Hoanib River mouth (Braine 1987) and at Mercury Island (MFMR unpubl. data) have been unsuccessful. Breeding is also suspected to occur at Easter Cliffs (Simmons & Kemper 2001) and Ichaboe Island supports a small breeding population of up to 13 pairs (MFMR unpubl. data). While the historical range is not thought to have



differed significantly from the present one, recent surveys suggest a slight eastwards expansion over the last 20 years (Vernon 2004).

Breeding adults are territorial, sedentary and non-migratory. Juveniles display a dichotomous post-fledging dispersal pattern. Based on resightings of colour-ringed birds, 60% of fledglings have been found to undertake localised dispersal movements in random directions from their natal sites. The remaining 40% undertake highly targeted 'migrations' to one of five known discrete nursery sites in Namibia and southern Angola (Leseberg 2001, Hockey *et al.* 2003). All nurseries lie north of the core breeding range and, combined, they support approximately 400 juvenile African Oystercatchers. A high proportion of juveniles migrate to the northern shores of Namibia, with over 50% found in roosts from Hottentot Bay north, while fewer than 10% are thought to remain in roosts within the core area (RE Simmons pers. obs.). Conditions at nurseries are favourable as food resources are abundant and competition with adults is negligible. Juveniles remain at the nursery for two to three years before returning to the natal site. Recent results indicate that body condition plays a role in determining dispersal strategy, with long-distance migrants being significantly heavier as chicks than short-distance dispersers (Hockey *et al*. 2003).

The global breeding population was estimated to be fewer than 2,000 pairs in the early 1980s (Hockey 1983a), making it the third rarest – as well as one of the most range-restricted – oystercatcher species in the world (Stattersfield & Capper 2000). In 2005, the global population was thought to number more than 6,000 individuals (Hockey 2005c). In Namibia, recent research has increased the Namibian population estimates (originally estimated at 1,200 birds: Hockey 1983a) to 2,860 birds, about 47% of the global population. This apparent increase probably represents a combination of improved monitoring and a real population increase, brought about by increased chick production in South Africa (Hockey 2001), 40% of which are estimated to make their way to Namibian nurseries (Leseberg 2001, Hockey *et al.* 2003), as well as increases in bird densities in South Africa (Underhill 2000a) and an increased alien mussel food resource throughout the region (Hockey & van Erkom Schurink 1992, Kohler *et al*. 2011).

ECOLOGY

The African Oystercatcher breeds from November to March in South Africa (Hockey 1983b), and from December to July in Namibia (Jarvis *et al*. 2001, MFMR unpubl. data). Relaying after an unsuccessful breeding attempt is relatively common and double brooding has been recorded at Halifax and Possession islands (MFMR unpubl. data). Breeding success in protected mainland areas in South Africa is far greater than in unprotected areas, with oystercatcher numbers typically doubling within 15 to 20 years after reserve proclamation. This suggests that mainland populations are generally below carrying capacity. In many unprotected areas, however, the number of young oystercatchers raised in a season is well below that needed to maintain a stable population (Loewenthal 1998).

Molluscs such as mussels, limpets and whelks, as well as bivalves (*Donax* spp.) dominate the diet (Hockey & Underhill 1984, Kohler *et al*. 2011). However, a major change in diet has occurred since the early 1980s, with the rapid spread of the invasive Mediterranean Mussel *Mytilus galloprovincialis*. This species was first introduced over 30 years ago and is now the most abundant intertidal bivalve on the west coast of southern Africa (Hockey & van Erkom Schurink 1992). This has resulted in this mussel now comprising about 60% (and up to 95%) of the oystercatchers' diet on the west coast of South Africa (Leseberg 2001, Kohler *et al*. 2011), and is also an important component of the diet of sub-adult birds in Walvis Bay (Leseberg 2001). Prey composition of oystercatchers foraging in southern Namibia remains more balanced than elsewhere (Kohler *et al*. 2011). The invasion of the Mediterranean Mussel has been linked to an increase in oystercatcher numbers on South African west coast islands, and may help to explain the apparent increase in Namibian populations.

THREATS

The single largest cause of breeding failure in this species is human disturbance (Leseberg *et al*. 2000). In Namibia, disturbance of nurseries is minimal at present but predation by gull populations on the islands (Underhill 2000a) can be detrimental; human disturbance may contribute significantly to incidents of gull predation there (MFMR unpubl. data).

TABLE 2.2:

Summary of counts of African Oystercatchers along the Namibian coast, 1990 to 2012 from the Avifaunal database, wetland counts (MET), island counts (MFMR), Braine 1987, Simmons *et al*. 1993, Anderson *et al*. 2001, Simmons & Roux 2001, R Braby, J Kemper, K Wearne unpubl. data.

Locality	Mean number ± 1SD	Maximum count	Number of counts
Kunene River mouth	1	1	2
Hoanib River mouth area	?	16	?
Uniab Delta	1	1	1
Huab River mouth	4	4	1
Cape Cross to 8 km North	8	8	1
Cape Cross Saltworks	2	2	1
Mile 4 Saltworks	18 ± 11	34	7
Swakop River mouth	1	1	1
Swakopmund to Walvis Bay	4 ± 2	8	6
Dolphin Park to Walvis Bay	12 ± 8	17	2
Walvis Bay Ramsar Site	113 ± 69	309	50
Sandwich North wetlands	19 ± 15	88	58
Sandwich Harbour	50	50	1
Sylvia Hill	1 ± 1	2	5
Easter Cliffs	19	19	1
Mercury Island	4 ± 4	20	103
Spencer Bay to Saddle Hill	23 ± 13	32	2
Hottentot Bay	25 ± 30	46	2
Hottentot Bay to Douglas Point	215	215	1
Ichaboe Island	44 ± 36	190	312
Flamingo Island	142 ± 69	220	3
Seal Island	88 ± 34	129	10
Penguin Island	98 ± 46	198	12
Agate Beach	34 ± 56	257	36
Aeroplane Bay	14 ± 10	42	31
Shark Island	10 ± 6	14	3
Radford Bay	7 ± 5	22	20
Five Roses	15	15	1
Second Lagoon	12 ± 9	31	42
Griffith Bay	19 ± 17	81	31
Sturmvogel Bucht	4 ± 2	5	2
Shearwater Bay	4 ± 6	17	7
Crystal Rock	25 ± 1	26	2
Guano Bay	16 ± 14	81	31
Halifax Island	106 ± 62	377	88
Grosse Bucht	28 ± 104	622	35
Long Island	2	2	1
Wolf Bay	18	18	1
Elizabeth Bay	43 ± 35	100	5

Locality	Mean number ± 1SD	Maximum count	Number of counts
North Reef	5 ± 3	8	3
Possession Island	356 ± 147	732	102
Albatross Island	4 ± 4	7	3
Pomona Island	58 ± 43	112	6
Plumpudding Island	21 ± 9	38	6
Sinclair Island	6 ± 3	11	6
Baker's Bay	10 ± 5	15	3
Orange River mouth (Ramsar Site)	3 ± 4	9	4
Orange River wetlands	18	18	1
42 localities	Mean: 1,730 birds		Counts: 1,053

Nest contents of nests close to the low-water mark may be lost during storms or spring tides (MFMR unpubl. data). Chicks can drown or starve to death if adults are prevented from feeding or reaching the chicks on the low shore. Some evidence of a reduction in roost size is apparent from Elizabeth Bay where sediment deposition in the bay may have smothered foraging grounds and has increased beach accretion by at least 500 m since 1990 (Simmons 2005d).

In South Africa, the breeding season coincides with the holiday and tourist season when the number of people using the coast increases dramatically. This leads to an increase in chick mortality, which was recently identified as the key reason (more so than egg loss) for local populations in South Africa being below carrying capacity (Hockey 2001). Chicks and eggs are frequently trampled by people and vehicles, and domestic dogs are a major cause of chick predation. However, this threat is likely to be less significant in Namibia because of the relative remoteness and inaccessibility of most Namibian oystercatcher breeding and nursery sites. Nevertheless, an increase in tourism using off-road vehicles enables more people to reach otherwise remote stretches of coast, exacerbating disturbance effects and reducing productivity, particularly at nursery areas.

CONSERVATION STATUS

The African Oystercatcher is listed as *Near Threatened* globally (IUCN 2014) and was recently downgraded in South Africa from *Near Threatened* (Underhill 2000) to *Least Concern* (Taylor *et al*. in press). It should be given *Specially Protected* status under any revised or future Namibian Parks and Wildlife legislation because of it small population, its endemic status and Namibia's position of hosting a significant proportion of the global breeding population and as nursery for approximately 40% of South Africa's production (Leseberg 2001). Latest population estimates and an apparent increase of the Namibian population indicate that it does not qualify for the *Vulnerable* category in Namibia. On grounds of its relatively small population size, we categorize it as *Near Threatened*. With the proclamation of the Tsau//Khaeb (Sperrgebiet) National Park in 2009, most nurseries are offered greater protection and the breeding populations on the islands are also protected through their inclusion in the Namibian Islands' Marine Protected Area. It is listed on Annex 2 of the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA).

ACTIONS

With the discovery of significant oystercatcher nurseries north of the breeding range, the conservation requirements of the African Oystercatcher have become more complex than previously appreciated. A large proportion (Leseberg 2001) of the global annual production is concentrated in a few specific localities in Namibia, so ensuring the survival of juveniles at these sites is as important as any other conservation measures implemented in Namibia or South Africa aimed at enhancing the population's productivity. If South African conservation measures are successful in increasing the annual productivity, it is likely that more juvenile oystercatchers will move to Namibian nurseries, thereby further increasing the importance of Namibia's role in global conservation efforts. The four largest nurseries (one at Walvis Bay and three situated north of Lüderitz around Hottentot's Point, Caravan Beach and Douglas Point), support 300 to 350 juvenile oystercatchers (Leseberg 2001, Simmons & Roux 2001, Wheeler 2001). With the proclamation of Namibia's entire coast as a series of national parks, all nursery areas in Namibia are formally protected; some additional indirect protection is currently afforded by the high security surrounding the diamond mining area in southern Namibia. Individual island management plans need to take African Oystercatcher conservation management strategies into account. Plans to award a tourism concession on Seal and/or Penguin Island (Currie *et al*. 2009) need to include restrictions such as no-go areas/seasons to minimize disturbance to the oystercatchers breeding there.