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Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

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American Oystercatcher

Haematopus palliatus

The American Oystercatcher is a large coastal shorebird with a long, laterally compressed, crimson bill. This species is unmistakable in flight, flashing a conspicuous white rump and white wing stripes. This species resides and breeds along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts from Baja, the Gulf of California, and Massachusetts locally south to the Bahamas, the Antilles, and northern South America.

Habitat. Nesting pairs of American Oystercatchers typically inhabit isolated beaches, dredged-material islands, and shell bars excavating a shallow nest scrape in the substrate above the high-tide line (DeGange 1978; B. Toland, unpubl. data). More recently, they have been reported nesting occasionally in salt marshes and Australian pine woodlots (Lauro and Burger 1989, Toland 1992).

Their diet consists of oysters, clams, crabs, sea urchins, starfish, marine worms, and other invertebrates (Terres 1980). American Oystercatchers lay 2 or 3 light buff-brown eggs, blotched and spotted with dark brown (Kale and Maehr 1990; Toland, unpubl. data). Both sexes incubate the eggs for 25 to 27 days, and the young first fly at about 35 days of age (Harrison 1978, Terres 1980).



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Seasonal Occurrence. Oystercatchers nest in Florida between March and July. According to Stevenson and Anderson (1994), some American Oystercatchers migrate into Florida for the winter, September through January.

Status. This species is listed by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission [editor: now Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission] as a Species of Special Concern (Wood 1994). The population decline of American Oystercatchers in Florida is a result of habitat loss and disturbance due to intensive beach development and concentrated human recreation (DeGange 1978).

The breeding distribution of American Oystercatchers in Florida is narrowly confined to the beaches, mudflats, and dredged-material islands on both coasts (DeGange 1978). They were formerly common in all suitable habitats (Howell 1932) but are now relatively rare, except for segments of the Gulf coast, where they are locally common (DeGange 1978; R. Paul, pers. commun.). Oystercatchers do not breed in the Keys, and the "possible breeding records from mainland Monroe County may refer to spring migrants or birds not breeding locally.

Because of their large size, conspicuous coloration, and ringing territorial calls, American Oystercatchers are easy to locate and fairly easy to confirm as breeders.

Brian R. Toland

Sponsored by James and Nell Potter

American Oystercatcher

