JESSIE WALTON

AFRICAN BLACK OYSTERCATCHERS
PROBLEMS FOR YOUNGSTERS?

Twenty-five years ago, the world population of the African Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini* was less than 5000 individuals, confined to South Africa and Namibia. On the basis of this, and because of several perceived threats to the population, the bird was included in both regional and international Red Data Books.

Researchers at the FitzPatrick Institute have been studying this species and tracking its changing fortunes over the last 30 years. This is one of the longest term studies of any bird in Africa. During this 30-year period, and especially in the last 15 years, things have been looking up for the oystercatchers. Due to a combination of an improved food supply and better protection, numbers have increased: the population is now approaching 7000 birds and the breeding range has expanded some 300 km to the east, with a handful of pairs now breeding in southern KwaZulu-Natal where they are not known to have bred previously.

Another recent development has been an unexpected change in clutch size. **African Black Oystercatchers normally lay two eggs, but since the late 1980s, an increasing proportion of pairs are laying three eggs,** even though to date we know of only two instances in which pairs have been able to rear three young successfully. This is a tantalising biological mystery

As population numbers have changed, so have the species' population dynamics. In many areas, because of improved food or reduced disturbance, territory sizes have shrunk, allowing new breeding pairs to set up territories. Another recent development has been an unexpected change in clutch size. African Black Oystercatchers normally lay two eggs, but since the late 1980s, an increasing proportion of pairs are laying three eggs, even though to date we know of only two instances in which pairs have been able to rear three young successfully. This is a tantalising biological mystery.

As numbers of breeders increase, more chicks will be born each season. This is predicted to result in changes in the movement and distribution patterns of young birds. At the moment, chicks born from about Knysna westward move west and north, many reaching Walvis Bay (well north of the species' breeding range), where they may spend up to four years before returning south to their breeding grounds. Birds born further east move both west and east, and an increasing number are moving to the central and northern KwaZulu-Natal coast.

In most areas, adults are territorial throughout the year. Dispersing juveniles are not tolerated within territories and must find areas that lack territorial adults or are outside the species' breeding range (in sites we term 'nurseries'). These nurseries are obviously critically important for juveniles because it is here that they must survive for the years before they can breed: if they don't survive to become breeders, they may as well never have been born in the first place (because they will have made no contribution to future generations).

We can make two important predictions about what will happen to young birds in the coming years:

- **Numbers joining nurseries will increase, potentially placing more pressure on the food supply in these areas.**

PHIL HOCKEY

A young oystercatcher carrying a unique colour-coded ring is readied for release.

From a conservation perspective, **it is essential that the known nurseries (e.g. Walvis Bay, St Helena Bay) be monitored and the new nurseries be located**. It is also important that we understand as much as possible about the origins of the birds using these nurseries

- **Birds will start to occupy new nursery areas (as is happening in KwaZulu-Natal).**

From a conservation perspective, it is essential that the known nurseries (e.g. Walvis Bay, St Helena Bay) be monitored and the new nurseries be located. It is also important that we understand as much as possible about the origins of the birds using these nurseries. The reason this information is important is that the nurseries are where birds spend a key part of their lives. Loss or degradation of nursery areas is just as concerning as loss or degradation of breeding areas. We need to know where these nurseries are and who is using them.

We are not starting this investigation from cold – we already know where many of the nurseries are because we have carried out an extensive chick-ringing programme since the early 1990s as part of our Oystercatcher Conservation Programme. We also have an extensive network of observers in position around the coast looking for ringed birds. What we do need, however, is the funding to continue the annual ringing operations (rings alone cost about R20 per bird).

When ringing chicks, we also collect tiny blood samples – these are analysed genetically so that we can monitor the amount of exchange between breeding birds in different parts of the coast. This too costs money! To keep this project running costs some US$10 000 p.a. To date it has been an extremely successful and important conservation project, and we hope it can continue as such.

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