Resurgent

AFRICAN BLACK OYSTERCATCHER

Twenty-five years ago, Africa's only breeding oystercatcher species, the African Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini*, was believed to be facing a conservation crisis. Today, it seems that the threats to the species' well-being may be significantly reduced. **Phil Hockey** reports

Photographs by Peter Chadwick
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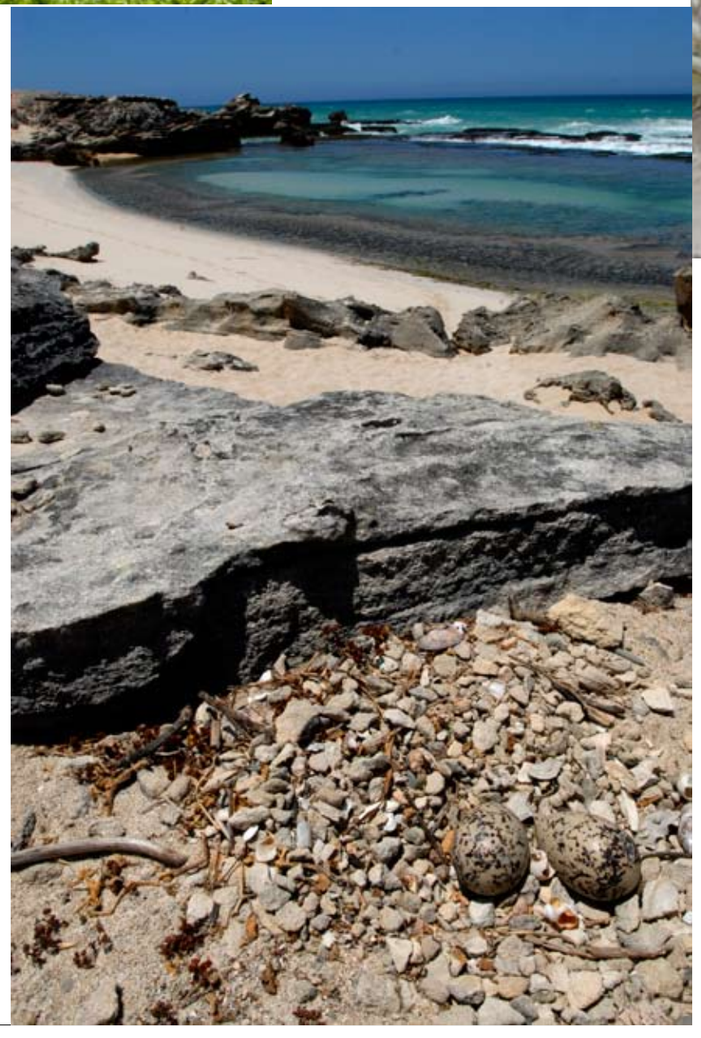
This mating pair neatly illustrates the differences in bill shape between the sexes. The bill of the male is short and chisel-ended whereas that of the female is longer and more pointed. These distinctions are reflected in subtle variations in their diets.

Breeding

One of the reasons this exclusively coastal species faced a conservation crisis was that it breeds in the open, on the ground, at the height of the summer holiday season when human pressure on the coast is at its greatest. Eggs were at risk from trampling and desertion, with dogs and off-road vehicles adding to the species' woes by destroying eggs and killing chicks. However, increased coastal protection, the seasonal banning of dogs from some beaches and South Africa's exclusion of off-road vehicles from beaches have all helped reduce the stresses on these birds. Ominously, however, recent research has shown that they are at risk from climate warming, with breeding success falling in hot summers.

Oystercatchers are long lived – some may reach 40 years or more. They also have long-term pair bonds: some birds stay together on the same territory for at least 20 years. Typically of long-lived animals, they reproduce slowly, rearing only one brood in a year. Most of the pairs that do breed successfully produce just a single chick, but in any one year many of the pairs that attempt to breed will fail. Fortunately, because they are so long lived, pairs only need to raise one chick every three years for the population numbers to remain stable.

Most waders have precocial young that are able to feed themselves directly they leave the nest. Oystercatchers are different in this regard. Because they eat shellfish which are difficult to prise from the rocks and to open, successful feeding requires considerable dexterity and strength. Even though the chicks leave the nest within 24 hours of hatching, they rely on their parents for food and it can take months before youngsters are sufficiently adept to be able to forage and feed independently.



Even though oystercatchers may live for 40 years, the most dangerous time of their lives is the 10-day period after they hatch: this is when most mortalities occur

TOP AND ABOVE *As chicks grow older, they need increasing amounts of food. When they are able to fly, and thus escape predators, they follow their parents around on the shore, incessantly begging for food. Once they are able to forage for themselves, however, they are evicted from the territory and for the next few years will have to put all their effort into survival to make sure they reach an age at which they too can breed.*

Because oystercatchers rely entirely on food from the shore, storms can cause significant problems for these birds, denying them access to their food supply. This may be one of the key explanations for why they breed in summer

Feeding

Not only have oystercatchers been afforded better protection in recent years, they have benefited from an improved food supply. In the late 1970s, an alien mussel species from Europe, *Mytilus galloprovincialis*, arrived at Saldanha Bay in the Western Cape. This species has now spread almost throughout the oystercatcher's range, in many places becoming the main prey of the birds. Apart from being readily accessible for longer during the tidal cycle than are native mussels, this alien species has increased the absolute amount of food on the shore. In some parts of the south coast, the native brown mussel *Perna perna* (as seen above) still dominates the shoreline, but this too may change in the years ahead.

The net result of better protection and more food has been an increase in the oystercatcher population. Indeed, in the past 30 years, numbers have risen by almost 50 per cent, a staggering rate of growth for a species that breeds so slowly. In addition, the bird's breeding range has been extending eastwards: in recent years, at least two pairs have bred on the coast of southern KwaZulu-Natal, something previously undocumented.

Because oystercatchers are territorial, increasing numbers pose a problem for young birds, namely, where and when to breed. The former decision seems to be hard-wired into their genes: most return to where they were born. The decision on when to breed is largely made for them by territorial adults because, even when conditions improve, it takes several years for adults to adjust their territory sizes. The consequence of this is that there are now many sexually mature birds waiting for an opportunity to breed; some may be 10 years or older. Importantly, however, this pool of 'floaters' provides a cushion against mass mortalities of breeders, as have happened in the past as a result of disease and shellfish poisoning. □

In the 1980s, the African Black Oystercatcher made its way onto the global Red List. Happily, in the next few years it should be possible to reclassify the species and include it among those facing no immediate threat