

# AMERICAN OYSTER CATCHER



One of the most colorful coastal birds that can be seen on Georgia's beaches is the American oystercatcher.



Common names for the American oystercatcher include: mantled oystercatcher, sea crow, and brown-backed oystercatcher.



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## American Oystercatcher

Scientific Name: *Haematopus palliatus*

Common Names: Mantled oystercatcher, sea crow, brown-backed oystercatcher

Georgia is home to several species of rare birds that nest exclusively on ocean beaches. One of the most colorful coastal birds, the American oystercatcher, makes its home on Georgia's wide beach flats and oyster shell bars.

American oystercatchers are large, boldly patterned shorebirds that normally grow to 16-17 inches in length. The oystercatcher's dark brown back contrasts with its black head and neck, red eye-ring, and yellow iris to make it distinctive from other shorebirds. A white underside and pale flesh colored legs are also traits of the oystercatcher. A flattened 4-inch blunt, chisel like bill ranging in color from deep orange to red with a yellowish tip completes the look of the oystercatcher.

Oystercatchers reach reproductive maturity between 3-4 years of age, and live about 10-20 years. American oystercatchers lay their eggs directly on the beach in shallow scrapes in the sand. After hatching, the chicks hide on the beach and in the dune grass. The nests and hiding chicks are very hard to see. Oystercatchers prefer to nest on wide expanses of flat beach that are above the normal high tide level.

Characteristics of the American oystercatcher include frequent preening (grooming), a tendency to walk rather than to fly, and highly skilled foraging techniques. Oystercatchers dine on crabs, marine worms, oysters, and other mollusks.

## Threatened Georgia Shorebirds

Birds that nest on the beach have a tough time successfully hatching their eggs and rearing young under normal conditions. Natural forces such as extra high tides, storm waves, and depredation by raccoons and crows can make successful nesting very difficult. High tides, and storm driven water can wipe out virtually all of the nests on a beach in a matter of hours.

When a beach becomes popular with people for recreational use, the nesting birds are faced with an additional challenge to successfully rearing their young. Tybee and St. Simons islands have no beach-nesting birds left on them. Nests and chicks are very sensitive to human presence.

## So when at Georgia's beaches, please:

- 1 Leave your dog at home. They destroy nests and chase young birds.
- 2 Hang out with the crowd, and avoid remote stretches of beach where birds may be nesting.
- 3 Walk or drive below the last high tide line to avoid injuring chicks or eggs.
- 4 Learn to recognize the birds on this brochure,
- 5 Try to avoid their nesting beaches from March through August,
- 6 And teach others to appreciate Georgia's native beach-nesting birds.

Photos Courtesy of Brad Winn - GA/DNR